SHARAF RASHIDOV

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by OLGA SHARTSE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The life story of Sharaf Rashidov, Uzbek writer, is typical of the majority of Uzbekistan's present-day intelligentsia. Born in a poor farmer's family, Rashidov had to start helping his father when he was only eleven.

Jizak, where the author was born on November 6th, 1917, was a small village the inhabitants of which eked out a bleak, hungry existence.

The brightest moments of his childhood are associated for Rashidov with his father and mother. The people, bowed down by their back-breaking labour, found consolation in song.

"My father," Sharaf Rashidov recalls, "taught me to love work since early childhood, and my mother taught me to love songs."

As a schoolboy Rashidov began to collect folk songs, to put legends and tales in writing, and soon after he tried his hand at writing poetry himself.

His first big work, a poem about Soviet frontier guards called *Border Guards*, was published in 1937.

Rashidov graduated from the Phylological Department of the Uzbek State University on the eve of the Great Patriotic War, and was appointed editor of the regional newspaper *Lenin Yuly*.

He volunteered soon after war broke out, was badly wounded and demobilized in 1942, and returned to Samarkand to take up his old job.

His collection of war-time poetry *Hatred* came out in 1945.

Rashidov, with his rare journalistic flare, often published his articles in the press, which in 1949 were collected and put out in a separate edition entitled *History's Verdict.*

Rashidov combines writing with an active political career. In May 1950 he was elected Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan and Vice-Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R.

Rashidov became especially popular as a writer after his book *The Victors* came out in 1951.

Sharaf Rashidov is also widely known as an active fighter for peace. As a member of different delegations he has visited Finland, China, India, Indonesia, the United Arab Republic, Pakistan, Burma, Viet-Nam, Afghanistan and Mongolia.

While sojourning in the different countries of the East he met many of their authors and showed a keen interest in their folk legends, sayings and stories. His story *The Song of Kashmir* (1957) was based on a legend of the Kashmir people. A new novel has come out lately called *Mightier than Storm* which is a stirring story of men developing virgin lands.

Sharaf Rashidov has been awarded two Orders of Lenin, the order of the Red Banner of Labour, the Red Star, the Badge of Honour and others.

"An entirely new type of farmer has come into the history of agriculture of all ages and peoples with the establishment of collective farms. Purposeful to remake Nature, he has entered into battle with the elements armed with marvellous technique."

I. Michurin

I

A line of gold flared up above the mountains—a slash across the dark sky. Now the disc of the sun rose swiftly above the mountain top and instantly everything was bathed in light: the rocks and hollows, the shrubbery on the mountain sides and the slender nut-trees at the foot.

The trees, slumbering in the coolness of the night, stretched to the sun, dipping their leaves in its light and warmth. Silvery brooks glimmered in the mountains, threading their way among the rocks of granite.

Day broke.

The sun rose higher and higher in the sky with every minute. The air grew noticeably warmer. Dew melted in the grass. Twilight still lurked in the depth of the gul-

lies, but even there it was beginning to thin out, receding before the light of day. The mountains unfolded in new and ever new colours.

The village of Altyn-Sai lay at the foot of the Kok-Tau. Seen from the mountain top in the summer, the village looked like a huge orchard. The numerous farm cottages were submerged in the green up to the very roofs. Here and there tall, tapering lombardy poplars jutted out amid this lush green sea.

A broad strip of carpeting, fiery-red with poppies, ran along the foot of the mountain beyond the end houses of the village. Closer to the mountain side the poppies gave way to violets, then a wilderness of vines and pistachios and, thronging the very foot of the mountain, a dense growth of nut-trees.

The unirrigated tracts of land belonging to the Stalin Collective Farm rolled away on the other side of the Kok-Tau.

There was plenty of land but, denied water, it was barren and idle, doing no good to man. In the spring, fiery-red poppies and blue violets covered it from end to end, and then it looked like a vast sea with red-blue waves driven across it by the wind. But spring passed, the flowers wilted, the sun sapped the grass of juice, and the land lay bare, rusty and desolate. The farmer, shielding his eyes with his hand, would gaze across this vastness and say with a bitter sigh: "Our barren land."

There was plenty of land but no irrigated fields. No rivers or canals would flow uphill, and so the unwatered tracts on the other side of the Kok-Tau yielded nothing but some straggly and puny wheat. There was not a

man in the whole village who did not cherish a dream of planting and growing cotton—that peerless treasure of his sunny land—but it was a futile dream where no water was to be had.

A narrow, tortuous path snaking out of the village first looped its intricate way through the poppy field, climbed the Kok-Tau with as much cunning, and then ran across the top of it.

There was another way of reaching the mountain top from Altyn-Sai up a level, well-laid road with sturdy bridges built across the mountain streams. But this took much longer, and to save time the villagers preferred to use the old narrow path. One had to be very nimble-footed and quick, though, to go up or climb down that path safely.

The view from the top of the Kok-Tau ridge in early spring was breath-taking in its wealth of light and colour. The steppe, basking in the rays of the smiling sun, rolled away to the horizon in a harmony of colours. The sun was still gentle. The skies were still serene.

The village orchards stood out in vivid green patches in this flowering steppe.

Just as the first rays of the sun turned the mountain tops to gold, a girl on horseback appeared on the pass. The handsome grey horse, excited by the climb, flung up its head and tugged at the bridle. The girl reined it in with a masterly hand.

The horse obediently changed to a walk, foam dribbling from its mouth on to the path.

The girl paused for a moment just where the descent began. From this height where eagles nest she looked

down upon her native village with the white of the cottages peeping through the green. She saw the village square and the white school-house she had gone to for eight years, the statue of Lenin and the red flag on the club house; this was the club where as a long-legged first-former she had once recited poetry more dead than alive with stage fright, and later had made reports and presided at meetings. There was her home, that small cottage once so noisy and hospitable and now so hushed and lonely. In the old days the place was always bubbling with life, what with her growing brothers and herself, Aikiz, a boisterous little girl; there had been Mother, youthfully light on her feet, busy about the rooms, the courtyard and the kitchen garden. Life had run a brisk and happy course, smoothly and sensibly managed, like a caravan travelling along a level road. And now there was no one in that cottage, no one but Umurzak-ata, an old man bowed down with grief.

This could hardly be called Aikiz's permanent home for she was away most of the time, either at her job or on lengthy business trips. Never before in this submontane region had a young girl, a freshly graduated agronomist, been elected chairman of the village Soviet in preference to some man of experience and prestige. Umurzak-ata was lonely all by himself, of course, but he was naturally flattered by the trust the people put in his daughter. He was seventy-five. Three quarters of a century was a long road to cover.

Though his own life was drawing to a close, his daughter Aikiz never seemed to grow up for him. He still thought her the same naughty and even whimsical

child who needed her parents' constant care and guidance.

Poor old, lonely Umurzak-ata....

Sensing the nearness of home the horse refused to stand still and flung its head impatiently.

"Patience, Baichibar!"

Aikiz swerved sharply towards the pass and jumped down to the ground. Loosening the saddle girth and unbridling the horse, she patted Baichibar's satin-smooth neck.

"Enjoy yourself."

Without stirring from the spot, Baichibar turned his slender beautiful head to his mistress, gingerly took the sleeve of her jacket into his teeth and began to tug at it.

"Well, what is it you want? I've nothing to give you."

Aikiz's arm grew warm with the horse's hot breath. She took a lump of sugar from her pocket and said with feigned sternness:

"Here, you spoilt brat."

Baichibar's soft lips touched her palm. The sugar crunched loudly in the horse's teeth. With his mane flying in the wind, Baichibar galloped away towards some rocks where tufts of young grass grew between the stones.

Aikiz followed the horse with her eyes, then turned and slowly walked towards the descent, flipping the legs of her smart riding boots with her crop. She raised her head and looked to the right of the path: there reared a great rock of porous stone covered with lichen, the

rock was as tall as a house. She clambered up it. Whenever she came riding this way she always rested a while on top of this rock, sitting there and thinking things over. Sometimes her thoughts would be happy, warming all her being as it were. Sometimes they would be anxious, when there was some hitch in her work, or she was annoyed with herself or with a friend. Sometimes she thought about life in general, of her family, of the future of her people. Sometimes she thought of her trifling personal affairs, a silly quarrel with her girl-friend, or a new dress that was a disappointment. She was an agronomist and the chairman of the village Soviet, but at the same time she was only a very young girl with all the awakening emotions of youth.

Aikiz was not feeling happy that day.

Frowning, she peered towards the west. There, on the horizon, the land showed hazily yellow—dead land.

Kyzyl-Kum.

Desert land.

The high dry wind came tearing from there in summer, bringing disaster to the farm's fields, scorching everything with the fiery breath of the desert.

This year, for the first time in history, a shelter belt of plantings confronted the farmers' eternal enemy. But it would take quite some years before the elms and acacias grew strong enough, flinging wide their sturdy branches, to withstand the onslaught of the dry wind and hurl it back into the vastness of the Kyzyl-Kum.

Aikiz thought apprehensively of the enemy lying low there in the west, crouching before its ominous leap.

She untied her bright silk kerchief and loosened her hair. Her fingers absently combed the black strands falling below her waist and plaited them into two heavy plaits. Aikiz could not rid herself of her anxious thoughts Looking down from this height the belt of young trees seemed nothing more than a miserable strip of grass which a herd could trample down with no effort at all. Oh, the years they'd have to wait before the trees grew tall and strong!

"If we had only planted this belt ten or fifteen years ago!" Aikiz was thinking.

She threw her plaits over her shoulder and felt the familiar thud on her shoulder-blades. Aikiz arranged the two plaits in a crown and put on her silk kerchief again.

She hated untidiness and carelessness in appearance or anything else. Before riding back home, after tramping the farm's fields all day, she invariably dusted and cleaned her riding boots. She held that a person should never let himself go, either in the presence of others or when left to himself.

She looked at herself in her pocket mirror.

"Alimjan. . ." she thought. Aikiz quicky slipped the mirror back into her pocket, blushing as though Alimjan could see her now.

"Baichibar!" she called, climbing down the rock.

The horse raised his head on hearing his mistress' call. He gave a shrill neigh and galloped back to Aikiz.

Leading Baichibar by the bridle, Aikiz began the descent from the pass.

The path ran down the mountain side thickly grown over with grass. Reaching the foot of the mountain, it

dived into the shadow of the nut-tree thicket. Yangok-Sai, a swift mountain stream, rushed down into the narrow valley, gurgling and leaping over the stones.

Baichibar thirstily strained towards the water.

When she had watered her horse, Aikiz bridled him again, tightened the saddle girth and jumped into the saddle. The water frothed as it swirled about Baichibar's legs.

Hitting the valley floor the little mountain stream swerved towards the east and as swiftly rushed on. This frugal water supply was all that their kolkhoz had for their orchards and vegetable plots. And there was no water for the fields.

When she had waded across the Yangok-Sai, Aikiz decided not to take the road which was some distance away from the stream. Instead, making a small detour, she went down the wide and gentle slope which began at the foot of the mountain and continued far into the steppe.

Baichibar's hoofs clattered on the ground untouched by a plough since the beginning of time. The soil was rich and fertile. The roots of plants rotting in it through countless centuries had made it so. Give this blessed land water and it will grow anything man plants, yielding untold harvests.

Give it water!

Six or seven kilometres away from the village of Altyn-Sai, the two mountain streams, Yangok-Sai and Uzun-Sai, join into one and carry their waters impetuously down and away. This is the Altyn-Sai River, which is what has given the name to the village. But the river

does not give a single drop of water to its namesake, and there is no power on earth that could force the Altyn-Sai to flow uphill.

Thousands and thousands of acres of fertile land lie locked in heavy slumber, languid with thirst, and the only relief they know is the short-lived grass that covers them in the fleeting days of spring.

Water, water!

"Only a short while ago Mirzachul was nothing but a desert, a hungry steppe," Aikiz was thinking. "But then people cut canals across it, gave the land water, brought machines to work the fields, and turned the hungry steppe into a land of plenty."

Aikiz rode slowly, holding back her impatient horse. Suddenly she reined him in: right in front of her, closer to the foot of the mountain beside a low hillock, she saw a small island of lush, bright green grass.

Aikiz headed towards it. It surprised and puzzled her.

She saw a small pool of rain water at the foot of the rise. There was nothing surprising in this of course, for hundreds of such pools appeared at the foot of the mountains after every spring rainfall. What surprised her was that this pool though shallow was still brimming with water.

There had been no rainfall for some time. Where did the water come from then? A tiny rivulet branching off from the pool disappeared into the ground no further than ten metres away. But it was running water nonetheless, it kept rippling away without exhausting the small pool.

There had never been any springs in this region. What nurtured the pool then, Aikiz wondered.

She jumped down and followed the boggy, sodden ground.

The bottom of the pool was lined with white pebbles, washed clean by the water and showing through the slimy, green mud.

Aikiz bent closer. She fancied she saw a spring bubbling up from under this lining of pebbles. Surely there could be no spring here though.

She squatted down and, plunging her hands into the slime at the bottom of the pool, tried to pry away the pebbles lining it. It seemed to her that the little pool grew deeper.

She felt hot, drops of sweat stood out on her forehead. Her heart was beating furiously.

She had no doubts now that she had come upon a mountain spring, and a mighty spring at that.

At last she straightened up. She stood there strenuously trying to remember all she knew about this place. The people called it the Hill of Slavery. Somehow it had never occurred to her before to find out why this humble hillock wore a name so sinister. It was obvious that the place was associated with some legend or ancient story which Aikiz had never heard.

She saw something sticking out of the ground at her very feet. With a few good kicks she knocked off the layer of caked mud.

This revealed a stump of an old plane tree.

Aikiz was puzzled. No trees had ever grown here as far as she knew. Now she looked about her keenly. Her

amazement mounted. On the other side of the pool she saw the mighty roots of another tree stump, gnarled and black, sticking out of the ground and covered with a layer of soil that had not been washed away.

Aikiz's mind worked feverishly. Her face felt hot. Questions thronged her mind: how long ago had the trees grown there, was it a hundred years, or more, when were they chopped down and who had chopped them down? She was quite certain now that the trees had grown close to an abundant spring, but the question was why the spring had dried up.

Aikiz climbed the hillock, leading Baichibar by the bridle.

The moment she got to the top, the solution dawned on her and she was surprised at herself for not seeing it all earlier.

The pool was not confined to the area washed out by the recent rains. From the top of the hillock she clearly saw a long, narrow hollow running down the hill-side. It must have been deep and straight once, but time and winds had demolished it and one could hardly see it now.

She tried to make sure of the all but obliterated traces of the ancient bed before the sun had reached its zenith and driven the shadows out of the creases and folds.

It was a ditch, an irrigation ditch.

Aikiz swung abruptly into the saddle and galloped down the slope, cutting straight across to the village. The wind whistled and howled in her ears. All the colours of the fields merged into one bright ribbon under Baichibar's hoofs.

II

Umurzak-ata had woken up early that day: sleep is short with the old. He put on a white shirt which came down to his knees, belted it with a blue silk kerchief, and came out on the verandah. The shirt, cut low at the neck, showed his chest, dark with sunburn.

He was tall, somewhat stooped, broad-shouldered; his whole frame emanated power in spite of his advanced years. Mechanically, he thrust his feet into his tall, soft boots, and twitching his shoulders in the morning coolness went down the porch steps and into the courtyard. He shielded his eyes with his large hand and scanned the sky.

The cool morning promised a fine day.

Unhurriedly, the old man poured some water into a shining new samovar, and threw a handful of lighted kindling down the funnel. A hot flame was soon blazing there.

He listened for a moment to hear if it had taken on well and then began to sweep the yard. It must be said that he kept it really spick and span to the envy of his neighbours who were not too keen on housework. Early spring flowers strained upwards to the sun, and their bright petals and leaves sparkled with drops of dew. A rosy light fell on the smooth, well-beaten court.

The old man wielded his broom with pleasure.

He felt the vigour of youth tingling in his muscles. Umurzak-ata kept glancing towards the Kok-Tau. It was three days since Aikiz had gone away, and time dragged on so endlessly without her. But he saw no one on the

pass, he heard no hoofs clattering down the mountain path, he caught no flicker of a girl's dress in the morning haze. He wondered if perhaps his eyes were playing him false, if they had lost their old keenness.

"I suppose it means she won't come today either," mused the old man. "I wonder what could have happened? They are probably having difficulties with the wheat sowing. And Aikiz is rushing about the fields, too busy to come home for a minute and see how her old father is getting on."

The samovar began to sing its piping song. In the silence of the clear morning its mosquito-thin voice was heard all over the yard. A jolly spurt of steam made the lid jump.

The old man ran indoors to fetch his large porcelain tea kettle. He dashed some green tea into it, squatted on his haunches in front of the samovar and filled the kettle with boiling water.

The heat coming from the samovar warmed his fingers pleasantly. Just then he heard the gate bang. A young man in military dress came in. The collar of his tunic, with the white band sewn inside and showing neatly, gripped his dark, tanned neck smugly. Though the tunic was old, much laundered, the shoulders and back faded in the sun, it fitted the young man so smartly and the wide officer's belt drawn tight outlined the slim waist so trimly, that it was obvious military dress was second nature to the wearer who was in no hurry to exchange it for a civilian coat.

The visitor stopped just inside the gate and clicked his heels. His hair was thick and black, stubbornly es-

caping his faded army cap. His eyebrows were straight and tipped upwards, his nose was bony, almost aquiline, with two stubborn little lines where the eyebrows met. All in all he looked sound, fit and courageous, and his eyes seemed to say: "I know what I want and I'll always get it."

Without putting the kettle down, Umurzak-ata turned round. The tips of his moustache went up in a smile.

"Alimjan, is that you?" he said. "Hello, my boy. Why so early? Going somewhere? Is everything all right at home? Everyone well? Is your sister Lola's laughter as merry as ever?"

"Good-morning, dear Umurzak-ata," Alimjan replied. "Everyone's well, and Lola too. I just dropped in to ask if Aikiz is back."

"I've no idea where my Aikiz is. I hardly know what to think."

"There's nothing to worry about, Umurzak-ata. I'm thinking of going into the mountains today. She's probably up there in the fields now. I really must go, I haven't been there for four days."

The old man gave Alimjan a hard stare from under his grey eyebrows, and then turned to his samovar once more.

After a moment of silence Umurzak-ata said:

"Of course you must go up to the mountains. But let's have some tea first."

Alimjan wanted to refuse the offer, but his host added firmly:

"You'll be in plenty of time. You're a young man, you're quick and smart. And then it's very early still.

I shan't let you go without some tea first, whatever you might say."

Placing the tea kettle on top of the funnel to brew, the old man started towards the house to fetch the food, when suddenly he stopped short and threw his head back, listening.

They both stood listening tensely for a few moments. Everything was perfectly silent. Suddenly they caught very distinctly a distant pounding of a galloping horse.

The old man hurried across the yard and flung open the gate.

The thudding of horse's hoofs came nearer with every minute.

Aikiz changed to a trot and bent close to the horse's neck while it slipped into the narrow gate with the low top bar. When she reined in, Umurzak-ata and Alimjan ran forward to take the horse.

She was excited with her swift ride; the wind had tousled her hair. Drops of sweat covered her high forehead. Her lips were parched and she kept moistening them with her tongue. There was so much eagerness and vim in her that the little yard itself seemed to brighten up.

Alimjan's eyes shone with happiness and love. In order not to reveal his excitement, he hastily began to unbridle Baichibar, he loosened the saddle girth and flung the stirrups over the saddle. He then led the horse away to a shed in the far end of the yard, tied him to the crib and brought in an armful of fragrant clover.

Umurzak-ata was speechless with joy at Aikiz's return—but after all it really had been three whole days,

a long time for those who await their dear ones. He held his daughter's head close to his breast, he kissed her high forehead and stroked her hair.

He had gone through a lot in his long life—he had known sorrow and grim hardship, pure joy and happiness. And now all the consolation he had in his old age was Aikiz. A day without her dragged like a year. There was a world of difference between his own youth and that of this new generation who never seemed to stay at home and were always away at work, conferences, or trips. Coming home late at night Aikiz would hardly touch the pillow before she was fast asleep, sinking into a deep, dreamless slumber, but with the first light of dawn her voice could already be heard ringing all over the house. Every new day brought new cares. It was either field work, or inspecting the dairy farms of the district, or off to the construction site of the new school, and then to the District Party Committee office.

"A person can't do without some rest," Umurzak-ata would scold her. "Even a bird needs rest."

He stood stroking her shoulder when suddenly he remembered.

"Why, tea, tea's been ready for ages. It's time we had some breakfast. Poor Aikiz, you must be weak in the knees from hunger."

He ran into the house so briskly that the verandah steps grunted and droned.

When Alimjan had taken care of the horse he came up to Aikiz. She told him to go indoors while she had a wash and changed her clothes. She bent down to finger a scratch on the toe of her boot. One of her plaits

slid forward and the tip brushed the ground. Aikiz glanced up at Alimjan.

"To begin with, you never said hello to me," he said.

Aikiz quickly straightened up. She threw her plait back over her shoulder and it flashed before Alimjan like a streak of black lightning.

"Hello," Aikiz said meekly. There was a twinkle in her eyes.

With the resolution born of despair, Alimjan continued:

"And secondly, I got a letter yesterday. It concerns us both. I want you very much to read it. I want you to read it here in my presence."

He took a neatly folded envelope from his breast pocket.

Aikiz slowly stretched out her hand for it.

But just then, the door into the house was hospitably flung open and Umurzak-ata called loudly:

"Come in, children. Breakfast is ready."

III

"I'm coming, Father," Aikiz called back and disappeared into her room.

Alimjan followed the old man into the house, and sank on to a carpet in front of a low table, covered with a table-cloth and loaded with dishes. He was perplexed. He felt as though he had been galloping towards some goal and in the very last moment his horse had tripped

and thrown him, and there he was dazed by his fall, with the goal as far away as ever.

Nervously he kept fingering his pocket to feel that the envelope he had thrust back was still there.

Aikiz walked in. With lithe grace she sank down on the carpet a little away from Alimjan.

"There, my darling, that's the best your old father could cook for you," Umurzak-ata said fussily. "Of course, when Mother was here, our meals were much better, more tasty and filling. But she would not stay with us any longer and has gone to lands so far that there is no return from there ever." Sorrowfully, he covered his eyes with his hand.

This mention of her mother pierced Aikiz's heart and made it shrink with acute pain. The girl, however, was always able to keep herself in hand whenever the old man began to speak of Mother. She pushed the dishes closer to her father and Alimjan, filled the bowls with tea, and to dispel the old man's sadness began to talk brightly and eagerly.

"You know, Father," she said, "the sowing up in the mountains is going on very well. People are working with zeal, the tractor brigade especially. Ivan Borisovich Pogodin told me today: 'I don't want to boast,' he said, 'but I'll be through with the sowing soon. Find a new job for my tractors, they're not used to standing idle.' I think I'll advise the farm board to switch Ivan Borisovich over to the virgin soil."

"Winter crops doing well?" Umurzak-ata asked curtly. Sadness still shadowed his features.

"They're good," Aikiz answered confidently. "We can reckon on a rich harvest."

"Don't hazard any guesses, daughter dear. It's too early to talk of a rich harvest yet. Up on the hills it depends entirely upon the weather."

"The weather is one thing, Father, but the fact that we're doing a lot to offset it is another. You know very well that we've only just upturned our virgin soil. Two or three more rainfalls and a rich harvest will be assured. All that worries me now is to get our harrowing and weeding done in time."

"Harrowing and weeding won't make the weather," the old man said. "You must have forgotten last year then. There was enough rain, early frost did no damage to the new shoots, and our wheat grew as tall as tall can be. But just as it was about to ear—there came the dry wind. And not a drop of rain. The wind was so fierce that before we knew it everything was scorched to blazes. And what about the year before last? Oh, what's the use of talking! A good half of our crops perishes each year, I reckon."

It was true, of course, what the old man had just said. But where could they find water? Where? "Water, water!" begged the parched, cracked soil, so dry and hard that footsteps rang on it. And crops thirsted for water.

Water! Aikiz glanced at Alimjan and then at Umurzak-ata. She thought of the pool at the foot of the Hill of Slavery. She could have given a graphic description of the hollow's every curve and dip from any angle.

Slowly Aikiz began:

"Father, let me tell you what I saw today. I was riding down the mountain, and came to that spot, you know that spot ... there, on the Hill of Slavery. And what d'you think I saw? Rain water had washed out a hollow, and I swear that it had washed open the outlet for a new spring. But it wasn't the hollow that surprised me, it was two huge, old tree stumps sticking out of the hollow. And when I topped the hill, I definitely knew that once upon a time a network of irrigation ditches had been there, fed by this spring. When could it have been, Father? It must have been in existence for more than a mere century for the stumps of the plane-trees were terribly thick, I couldn't put my arms around one. Have you ever heard anything about it, Father?"

"You, the oldest member of our kolkhoz, must surely know the history of the Hill of Slavery," Alimjan said with mock severity. "Do tell us, Father."

Umurzak-ata propped his elbow on a cushion which Alimjan had courteously moved nearer to him, and with a far-away look in his eyes he seemed to be plunged in reminiscence, searching the depths of his memory.

At long last he began to tell his story, slowly and lengthily, with the mastery our old people are famous for.

"I've lived for seventy-five years, my dear children. About forty years ago I witnessed frightful events with my own eyes, events I shall speak of now. The Hill of Slavery is what the people have always called the spot. A ghastly crime was committed there: water was stolen from the people. It was stolen brutally, spitefully."

"But how could that be?" Aikiz queried. She was listening tensely.

"It could, you see. It happened just before the Revolution. In those days the Hill of Slavery was considered a sacred spot. There was a copious spring at the foot of it. It was so copious that a great tract of land could have been watered with it. Both the spring and the fields it watered belonged to a man who was considered a saint even in his lifetime—that was mullah Kabulkhoja.

"The mullah's slaves lived in mud hovels clustering to the mountain side higher up and there was no water to be had there; later on they moved down and settled where our village is now. Those people owned no land at all. They all worked for the mullah.

"Two huge plane-trees grew close to the spring. People said that they were each at least three hundred years old. The grandfather, or perhaps the great-grandfather of the mullah, had proclaimed the spring and the trees sacred. In those days people were ignorant and they believed in many things: for instance, they believed that if a woman who was barren brought the mullah a costly gift, and then spent a few nights in a tiny cell close to the spring in the shadow of the sacred trees, she would bear a child in less than a year. The ignorant people believed the place could work miracles, and the mullah collected a sure and ample income as a toll for ignorance.

"I must also tell you, my dear children, that mullah Kabulkhoja had an only son called Azimbai. The mullah loved him with all his heart and soul. All he

did was scheme how best to increase his beloved son's wealth. And so those two leeches—the old and the young—sucked the blood of the downtrodden people.

"The more blood a leech sucks the greedier it becomes.

"The wealth acquired by Azimbai and Kabulkhoja could not quench their greed. They were resolved to increase it tenfold in the shortest space of time. And in order to achieve this they decided to direct the water of the spring into the submontane regions. I do not know how they wanted to do it, but everything went to show that they had thought of some way.

"In early spring, Kabulkhoja and Azimbai forced all their debtors to turn out and work for them. Everyone in the district owed them money. To begin with, they were ordered to clear and deepen the bed of the stream where it emerged from the mountain. Even now if you look closely you can see that the widened gully is the work of man and not a whim of nature.

"Mullah Kabulkhoja proclaimed this work particularly pleasing to Allah, and promised the faithful that those of them who toiled zealously, in the sweat of their brow, would go straight to heaven. Azimbai on his part neither preached nor promised anything. All he did was make an announcement before work began that plentiful food would be provided to everyone—but even this promise was nothing but empty words.

"In rain and snow, the hungry, poorly clad people toiled from morning till night in the gully pierced by icy winds. Many of them died from exhaustion and disease. Although they worked themselves to the bone

the progress they made was like a turtle race. For a long time the people suffered in silence. But then even their cowed patience wore thin. They refused to go on. Enraged, Kabulkhoja sent Azimbai to settle the issue. He tried both persuasion and threats, but the people simply refused to listen to the mullah's son. Their hatred, once it had broken through, knew no bounds. The fat Azimbai turned to flee, but too late. The people stoned him to death and threw his body into the stream which in those days was abundant in water.

"The people were made to pay for their riot and the murder of Azimbai. Many were beheaded. The mullah was so upset he gave up all thought of continuing with the work. But his viper's soul knew no rest. Though he had avenged himself for his son's murder by beheading all those downtrodden peasants driven to it by that scoundrel, his lust was unappeased.

"The mullah swore greater vengeance and there seemed no end of his cruel schemes.

"But soon after the murder of Azimbai and the execution of the peasants came the Revolution. The old jackal knew he was doomed, that there was no escape for him from Nemesis. He knew that he would share his son's fate and be stoned to death like the mad dog he was. He arranged to flee the country. But a viper, even crushed and dying, strives to sting to the last. And Kabulkhoja was a true viper. Before he fled he wreaked vengeance on the people, stinging them in the most vulnerable spot. The spring dried up. The water flowed no longer. No one ever learned how he did it.

"There was panic and confusion at first. But then a righteous fury seized the people and they razed the den of the vile hypocrite stone by stone. That was when they chopped down the trees. They were already very old and withering, there were fewer green leaves on the branches than *alyams*, those tokens the mullah used to delude the faithful into hanging on the boughs in the name of Allah. They chopped down those two trees which had been worshipped through several centuries, so as to erase all memory of the villainous mullah from the face of the earth. And that, my dear children, is the story of the Hill of Slavery."

Umurzak-ata's throat was dry. He stretched for his bowl of tea already gone cold and drained it at a gulp.

"But haven't people ever tried to reclaim the spring afterwards?" Aikiz asked impatiently.

Her eyebrows met in a frown and a stubborn line appeared between them.

Umurzak-ata looked at his daughter and smiled.

"Of course they have, my dear," he said. "People are forever striving to better their lot. A man only comes to rest in his grave. They did try. And I, too, made many a secret search of that spot to find where the spring had been choked. I refused to believe that that cursed Kabulkhoja could have stopped the water for ever—may the hatred of all honest men from now and for ever reduce the jackal's name to ashes! But all was in vain. Neither I nor anybody else have ever found out what the fanatic had done to the spring. But what's the use of talking—it wasn't only the Hill of Slavery

where the people were robbed of water. They used to do it everywhere. Take Kok-Bulak for one."

"I've heard say that once upon a time Kok-Bulak was a mighty spring, and the force of water never slackened," Alimjan said thoughtfully.

"The Kok-Bulak disappeared quite recently," Umurzak-ata said. "I believe I can still remember the taste of the water. It happened just before you were born, Ai-kiz," he turned to his daughter. "The basmach bands harboured malice against our village because we were so strong in self-defence. They never once managed to rob us. And as for the Red Army units they always found hospitality, food and reinforcements in our village. To revenge us the basmach men destroyed the Kok-Bulak. They somehow choked the spring and then blew up the overhanging walls of the gully above it. There's rubble all over the place. Old-timer that I am, even I can tell only very approximately where the spring had been. And now the whole of that bend of the Yangok-Sai River, almost half a kilometre long, is called Kok-Bulak."

For a few minutes there was silence in the room. The samovar stopped humming. The bowls of tea remained untouched. The cakes and raisins were untasted. A moth fluttered close to the ceiling, its white satin wings rustling.

Suddenly Aikiz raised her head and stared hard at Alimjan. Her eyes were the colour of dark bronze. Alimjan had known them to be tender or hot, but never cold. And now he sensed a coolness in her look.

But he was mistaken. For now Aikiz began to speak, her voice tense with excitement.

"We've got to reclaim all the springs. We've got to make full use of the waters of the Yangok-Sai. To utilize the stream and turn its course into the Altyn-Sai fields. We've got to and we can do it. To think that all that land has been idle for long, long centuries doing no good to mankind! Virgin lands that had never nurtured a seed! We shall unearth the springs and release the water. We shall turn the course of the Yangok-Sai and water all the fields of Altyn-Sai."

Even Umurzak-ata who knew his daughter through and through was amazed at her daring resolve. He was slow to comment for he hated it when the tongue was quicker than the mind. "Like a seed in the ground, thought must ripen first before sprouting for all to see," was Umurzak-ata's philosophy.

Alimjan spoke first.

"You're right, Aikiz," he cried, and banged his fist on the carpet. "We must follow the way shown to us by Grigory, the way of the Russian people."

"What Grigory? I don't think I ever heard that name before, my son," Umurzak-ata wanted to know.

"I mean my army friend. He's far away now, an agronomist in the Volga country, but our friendship is as close as ever. I got a letter from him yesterday. He says that they've declared war on drought. They're doing it up there, so why don't we? It won't do for us to lag behind. Well, friends, I'm all for making it a popular endeavour. Your hand, Aikiz, I'm grateful to you."

He offered her his hand, but Aikiz did not see it and continued excitedly:

"We've all got to do our part in this great endeavour. We need courage. But, Alimjan-aka, haven't we courage enough? Our lands are thirsting for water, and we shall give them water."

Umurzak-ata bowed his head. His long grey beard fell on the flowered table-cloth. Irritation was surging up in him: now and then he shook his head and it looked as though he were dusting the table with his beard.

"A man who acts hastily is not unlike the blind: both are liable to bruise themselves," the old man said angrily. "This requires thought, daughter. Look before you leap, it's an old saying. It's quite a business interfering with the sowing and switching all the men on to digging up the springs. Kadyrov will never agree. He'll say: 'What if it gets us nowhere? What if we fail to locate the springs?' "

"We *must* find them!" Aikiz cried heatedly. "And then what's the difference what Kadyrov says? It's the people who should be consulted."

"You say that the Yangok-Sai must be forced to relinquish its waters to us. Why, if that were not a dream the people would have learned to control the Yangok-Sai long ago. This struggle for water has been going on for centuries."

"In other words you think it's hopeless?" Alimjan asked.

"Hopeless? It's dangerous. It'll be just a waste of manpower when there's other work to be done."

The old man's anger mounted, but Aikiz in her excitement failed to notice the brusqueness of his tone. But he did not wish to argue with his daughter in the presence of a guest, and so he turned, strode to the door, tore it open and went down into the courtyard.

"What's wrong with him?" Alimjan asked anxiously.

"It's me he's worried about," Aikiz said with a smile of understanding. "He's afraid that in my inexperience I might blunder and do something we'd never live down." She was clearing the table hurriedly. "Well, I'm for the village Soviet," she said jerkily. "You're going to the farm office, aren't you? We're going the same way then, come on."

"All right, and on the way I'll show you this letter."

They came out on the verandah. Umurzak-ata was in the far end of the courtyard, absorbed in his budding rose bushes.

'Good-bye, Father," Aikiz called to him.

"Good-bye and thank you, Umurzak-ata," Alimjan called too.

The old man did not turn round, he merely grunted something in reply.

Once out in the street, Alimjan took the letter out of his pocket and handed it to Aikiz.

"Greetings, dear Alimjan," Aikiz read. "I got your letter which instantly brought back to me all our fighting days and all that we had gone through together. I miss you, friend, more than I can say. I'm up to my neck in work here. Drought has no chance now—we're advancing upon it in a wide front.

"I've got some good news: a son was born to Valya, my wife. A tough little fellow, he weighed four kilos, and there was a note of command in the very first yell he gave, a mighty yell he has too. I'm altogether pleased with my son and heir. The whole kolkhoz joined in the celebrations, and how are things with you? Are you and Aikiz married yet?..."

Aikiz dropped her hand with the letter clutched in it and fell behind a step. Alimjan turned to her abruptly; Aikiz raised the letter to her eyes again and tried to concentrate on the leaping lines. They walked on.

"Good luck to you and Aikiz from Valya and me," Aikiz read on. "We'll be glad to have you with us for a visit and we promise to mark the event with a great to-do. I mean it, why can't you come and stay with us for a month or so this autumn after you're through with your harvesting? Do come, we're looking forward to it. Your friends, Grigory and Valya."

For a while they walked on in silence until they came to stop in the shade of a plane-tree. Their ways parted here.

Alimjan tried to thrust the letter back into his pocket, but his strong fingers shook and the letter refused to go in.

"That's not the way," Aikiz said softly, and did it for him.

"He keeps asking about us in every letter of his," Alimjan's voice was husky. "What shall I say to my friend, Aikiz? What shall I say to him when I don't know my darling's answer?"

Aikiz's eyes were on the tree, watching the chain of ants running up the rough bark.

"Aikiz," Alimjan called tenderly.

"Yes, Alimjan?"

"When will our wedding be?"

Aikiz touched the tree and instantly two ants climbed on to her finger; flustered and confused they hurried up her arm.

She looked at Alimjan with a cunning twinkle in her eyes.

"Imagine talking about it in the middle of the street!" she said. "Don't you know it isn't done? And then look, see all those people waiting for me at the village Soviet?"

IV

Umurzak was one of the poorest men in Altyn-Sai in the days when the rich landowners held sway over the labourers. Need lived in his tumble-down cottage permanently, and hunger was a frequent guest. His children died as soon as they were born. His wife Khalbibi had smiled her last so long ago that he had actually forgotten it. In her misery she could not even bring herself to speak above a whisper. Grief had dimmed the light in her sparkling eyes and washed the colour off her pretty face. She would jump up in the middle of the night and anxiously listen to the breathing of her two baby boys. Were they still alive, her Alisher and Timur?

The family's fortune turned when the Soviet Government allotted Umurzak twelve *tanabs* of land. Though need still lived in the house it was no longer its mistress. Umurzak put on some colour and flesh and broadened out in the shoulder. Alisher and Timur were becoming robust little fellows too.

Aikiz was born when the elder one was ten.

In the old days, the birth of a daughter was rarely a joy to the peasant: it was a helper, a son, he wanted. But contrary to custom Umurzak welcomed the arrival of a daughter as if it were a gift from heaven. Khalbibi seemed to shed her years. Her laughter rang merrier now than in her youth. She adored the little girl.

A new life began. The villagers of Altyn-Sai founded a collective farm. They joined forces against the village kulaks. The landowners lay low. Basmach bands came to their rescue, but they had to deal with thousands of strong, clear-eyed and resolute Red Army men.

And that was how happiness came to stay. It seemed to Khalbibi that everything was aglow with this happiness: her children's school books and her friends' plentiful homes; Umurzak's speech, too, rang with the happiness born of confidence and security. It also showed in the village children. They no longer knew hunger, or heard the spiteful bickering of people driven to despair by insecurity and need.

Khalbibi was particularly proud of her Alisher, for he was always at the top of his class. He finished secondary school with honours. When he brought home his school certificate he told his parents that his mind was

made up to go to Leningrad, the birthplace of the October Revolution, and enter an institute there. The news frightened Khalbibi. The journey to that great town took five whole days. And by train too, not on horseback. He might fall ill, or anything might happen to him, heaven preserve him, on that long journey. But Alisher's decision was unshakeable—he would go to Leningrad and come back a full-fledged engineer. "Alisher is a good son," Khalbibi was thinking. "He won't change, he'll be as respectful to his mother when he comes back a great and learned man. But still. . . ."

"Let it be so," Umurzak said gravely. "An engineer born in Altyn-Sai, that's a big honour for the whole village."

The following year Timur left as well. He wanted to become an agronomist. The Institute of Agriculture was in Tashkent, but then Tashkent, too, was not too near.

That year their collective farm was well on the way to winning first place in the district. Khalbibi, one of the best workers, had little time for brooding about her boys. Busy as she was, though, she always found the time to care for her little Aikiz, to dress her nicely and make rich, fat *kurama* or *bugursak* for her. Her heart dissolved in tenderness when she combed her daughter's long black hair, which fell to her knees, and plaited it into thirty or forty plaits.

"Ah, what thick, lovely hair!" she would say, and suddenly ask in alarm: "It's so heavy, it doesn't make your head ache, does it, my darling lamb?"

"Look at her eyelashes," she would say to her hus-

band. "They're so long, they won't harm her eyesight, will they?"

Aikiz grew up a healthy and happy girl. Khalbibi remembered herself as a very different child. Her daughter had a restless, seeking nature, she wanted to know everything, everything interested her. When she was six she pestered her father with such baffling questions that all he could do was shake his head in reply.

"Why does the sun shine in the daytime when it's light anyway, and why is it too lazy to shine at night when it's dark and you can't play out of doors? Why do storks stand up in their nests on one leg? Does their other leg hurt?"

"Is the mullah a greedy man? Why does he wear that great big turban on his head? It would easily make eight dresses for ten little girls."

In order to answer these questions one had to know something of the world and to be able to read books. Alisher would seat Aikiz on his lap, place ten matches on the table to represent the ten girls, and give every one of them a pumpkin seed, as if it were a dress. In this way he tried to teach Aikiz that eight and ten were not the same thing.

Aikiz knew a whole year before she was due for school that eight dresses could not be divided among ten little girls, and that there were things like subtraction, addition and multiplication in the world. As for the mullah's turban Alisher had no trouble at all in explaining it to her. Mullahs, he said, belonged to the old way of living. They taught religious superstition. Aikiz nodded in understanding and agreement.

To tell the truth, Aikiz was the family despot. No matter how dead tired Umurzak might be after a day's hard work, he'd have no peace with the girl pestering him for information.

"Who pays the basmach people their workday units? What are those books made of?" and so on, and so on.

Timur, poring over his geology, would be trying hard to memorize the different finds and discoveries made by the various expeditions. But Aikiz would not let him be, she wanted to know right away what people were looking for in the mountains and what were all those rocks and ores for.

At last came the day for Aikiz to go to school.

She was very quiet when she came back. Khalbibi was afraid the child had fallen ill. The next day Aikiz was quite downcast. And on the third day, biting her lips to hold back the tears, she confessed that it was too hard for her at school.

"It's too hard for *you*?" her brothers exchanged puzzled looks.

Umurzak-ata sat stroking his beard in disappointment.

Khalbibi tried to comfort the girl.

"Never mind, daughter, never mind.... Everything will be all right, don't cry."

And then through a storm of tears Aikiz told them that it was terribly hard sitting still for an hour, two hours, three hours, listening to the teacher telling them things that Alisher and Timur had explained to her a year ago. It was awfully hard reading syllable by syllable when she had read the whole reader through the day her father had bought it for her.

Aikiz graduated from the seven-year school with honours. All the books the local library had to offer had been read through. The future appeared simple and clear to her: three years of secondary school and then Timur's institute of agriculture. She would come back to her own kolkhoz a learned agronomist, a useful member of society.

Aikiz, though, had already shown her worth when confronted with an emergency earlier that spring.

The day had been clear and bright, bringing promise of happy surprises—the sort of day one remembers in one's early youth. Aikiz and the other seventh-form girls had set out for the high-lying fields to help the farmers. As usual, Lola and Mikhri, two junior girls, got Aikiz to take them along.

These two girls were called Aikiz's shadows, and indeed they followed her everywhere. The two were great friends though they differed entirely in everything. Mikhri was a shy, taciturn, long-legged girl, whose father, Muratami, lived up in the mountains and only came down to Altyn-Sai when sowing or harvesting was at its height and all hands were needed. Lola was a noisy little fatty, sister of Alimjan who was then the secretary of the local Young Communist League organization. They differed in everything—temperament, tastes and looks. Their closeness seemed due entirely to their loyal, blind and selfless love for Aikiz.

They had gone up the steep and narrow path to the pass. The spring sun caressed the girls' faces. The air was transparent. Down below the apple-trees were in flower. Farther up the slope the trees were just budding.

And right on top, at the pass, the young, tender blades of grass were only beginning to show.

When the girls had reached the top and sat down for a rest, Aikiz noticed that the great stone on the left of the pass was lying on the ground whereas she knew perfectly well that it had always stood up with its narrow end jutting skywards. Aikiz left her friends and went to investigate. The stone was not easy to move, yet someone had taken the trouble to do it. It was not the time of year for avalanches either. Who could have wanted to push it down and why? Suddenly a flock of little birds flew up from under her very feet. She squatted beside the stone and saw some grains of wheat scattered in the grass.

Her first reaction was fear, even before she had quite taken in the crime that was revealed to her or saw the corner of the sack sticking out underneath the stone. She knew now why it had been pushed down and the knowledge shocked her.

Her friends called to her. She heard Lola's merry laughter. But Aikiz rushed down the path, turned off it sharply and hid in the nut-trees.

She had to collect her thoughts. She had to work out who could have stolen and hidden the wheat belonging to the farm. But no, there was no need to work anything out: the man entrusted with carting the wheat was her uncle Gafur, her own mother's brother. He was the only man who did the carting and was therefore the only man who could have stolen the sacks.

Aikiz was an active member of the Young Pioneers, whose leader, the schoolteacher Zukhra, thought very

highly of her. "Who is that man robbing our kolkhoz? He's an enemy of the community, a saboteur. Therefore he's an enemy of all working people, of our whole Soviet land. He's worse than a vermin..." Aikiz was reasoning with herself.

But there was no use reasoning now: Uncle Gafur was an enemy of the kolkhoz.

It would hurt Mother dreadfully when she found out.

Aikiz straightened up, smoothed and plaited her hair, and slowly started down for the village. She was very thirsty. Apple-trees were in flower on both sides of the path. It seemed to Aikiz that she was a very little girl the last time she saw them, and yet it was only an hour ago. The school caretaker told her that Zukhra had been called away by phone to the District Party Committee office and would not be back till evening.

"I can't wait till evening," Aikiz said and walked out.

She could not wait till evening: the pass was deserted, everyone was out working in the fields. The moment it grew dark Uncle Gafur was certain to cart away the grain or hide it elsewhere.

She was in luck: the young Komsomols were all out in the fields but their secretary was in his office, busily writing something at his desk.

"Good-morning, Alimjan-aka," Aikiz said loudly. "I've come on some urgent business."

The secretary smiled at her grave tone and got up. He was a very tall, lean young man, whose shoulders and chest were just beginning to fill out. There was no resemblance between him and his sister Lola.

He put his hand on Aikiz's head.

"Hello, dear girl. State your urgent business. You're Umurzak-ata's daughter, aren't you?"

She jerked her head and Alimjan's hand hung in the air.

"Sit down," she said to him brusquely and did so herself.

As soon as she began to speak Alimjan's smile fled his face and he became all attention. What Aikiz liked about him was that he did not interrupt and listened to her gravely without taking his eyes off her face. He was quick to understand things she could not or did not wish to tell him; he knew that those wretched sacks of wheat hidden underneath the stone up on the pass were crushing her with their unbearable weight.

"Thank you, my dear," he said when Aikiz had finished.

"Thank you," he said again and shook her hand. "We shan't let him get away with it."

Aikiz liked the feel of his strong hand in her own slim one: her confidence in him was complete. She leaned closer to look into his earnest eyes and said:

"I was going back to school in the autumn, to the eighth form, and after I had graduated from secondary school I was going to enter the Institute of Agriculture. But now I think my studies can wait. What's your advice, Alimjan-aka? Won't it be better if I sow and reap some wheat with my own hands to make up for what my uncle has stolen from us?"

Alimjan appreciated the turmoil in the girl's heart. His breath caught with brotherly tenderness for her. He

got up and paced the room in an effort to master his emotion.

"Our kolkhoz is not so down and out that we should make our children work," he said. "You've come to a wrong decision. A good, knowing agronomist—that's what you must strive to become. So don't give up school, my dear. The harder you study the more good you will do to the kolkhoz. And as for the one who wanted to benefit by robbing it, he'll pay for his crime."

When, a year later, Aikiz had joined the Young Communist League, Alimjan used to say:

"We're bringing up our own agronomist. Planting a choice seed in fertile soil."

V

The summer of 1943. Alimjan had been called up long ago.

Once in a while letters arrived from Alisher and Timur fighting on the front line. They were hastily written, laconic notes. But to Aikiz they were as absorbing as full-length novels.

Shortly before the war, the kolkhoz put up a new five-room house for Umurzak-ata. After seeing her boys off to war, Khalbibi grew noticeably aged and sad. She kept the boys' letters in the rooms that were to be their own. There were two girls whom she would like to see them marry....

Aikiz had her own doubts and worries. There was another year of school ahead, and then the institute. But was this the time to think of oneself, of one's education? All one's endeavours should be directed towards helping the country win the war, and this meant taking on the fighting men's jobs at the kolkhoz. In the beginning she found it difficult to combine work with study, but then she said to herself: "And what about the soldiers fighting on the front lines? Is it easier on Alimjan than me? I shall study and work both. And as for the institute, I'll take a correspondence course just as well."

The kolkhoz fields were worked by women, youngsters and old men. Aikiz combined the jobs of kolkhoz vice-chairman and secretary of the Y.C.L. organization. She had more work than she could handle but she did not drop her studies.

At long last she got her first letter from Alimjan—her long-awaited letter, for something told her that he was sure to write. She sat over her answer all night. She began with a detailed account of all that had already heen done at the kolkhoz and what its immediate plans included. Next came a great many questions: Aikiz begged Alimjan to write back and give her his friendly advice. All her doubts, complaints and hopes went into that letter.

After that they wrote to each other regularly until the day Alimjan was demobbed from the army. Their letters were friendly and frank, and neither Aikiz nor Alimjan knew when first their love was revealed in them.

It was spring again. Aikiz was studying for her exams and Alimjan was fighting on the approaches to Berlin. Grief came to the family of Umurzak-ata. Timur fell in battle, and soon after—Alisher.

Umurzak-ata was away at a meeting in Tashkent when the news came. He returned feeling younger and happier, bringing presents for his wife and daughter. But hardly had he crossed the threshold when he knew that the worst had happened. Khalbibi was sitting at the dinner table as though turned to stone. The table was laid with a cloth so white it dazzled him. And on it lay two pieces of paper with a little pile of medals beside each one.

Umurzak-ata could not read or write, even print he could barely decipher, but his heart read the grim message in the two piles of medals.

"Can it be true?" he said tonelessly.

"Yes," Aikiz said and dropped her head.

He brought the medals close to his eyes and fastened his unblinking gaze on them. One of the medals had a jagged edge. That was where the bullet or the shell-splinter had hit. Umurzak-ata sank down on the floor and wept, soundlessly and hopelessly.

It was then perhaps, in those blackest of moments, that the first line appeared on the girl's brow.

Ever since her boys had gone to war, Khalbibi had been doing the work of two on the farm. She took no days off and always said that she'd have her holiday when her boys came home safe and sound. And now she spent her days and nights sitting listlessly by the window, locked in apathy, deaf to everything, even the

tears of her daughter. There was no strength left in her to master her hopeless grief. Soon she was no more. The new, fine home was plunged in melancholy and sorrow.

The old man was bowed by this fresh disaster but not broken.

"Daughter," he said to Aikiz soon after his wife's funeral, "Alisher and Timur are gone, but their comrades are still fighting, they are defeating the enemy but Berlin has not been taken yet. The comrades of my sons will need bread. Tell me, my only child, could we not try and give them more help than we did before? Could we not try harder?"

And Umurzak-ata fell hungrily upon his work. Aikiz understood that this was his way of fighting down his sorrow. Work drugged pain. But occasionally grief took the upper hand, and then he would go into one of his boys' rooms and weep, burying his face in their dear clothes.

He thought Aikiz did not know. But she did. Making a supreme effort she held back her tears for her father's sake, because of her great love for him and the heart-breaking tenderness she felt for him. When his storm of grief had abated, Aikiz would come into the room with apparent composure and lead him away.

The old man's wounded heart was slow to heal. Little by little his poignant grief gave way to brooding sadness. He had won in the grim battle with woe.

Umurzak-ata was known and respected not only in the village but in the whole district for his honesty, straightforwardness and diligence. And now the people

came to love him more than ever for the beauty and staunchness of his spirit. They began to call him the "father of our two officers." His work was outstanding. Officials from the district often called upon him, and not only to pay their respects but also to consult him on matters of management.

The hardest time was over for Aikiz it seemed, for her father could do without her daily support now. It was only after he had recovered somewhat that the bitterness of her grief, the irrevocability of the loss, bore down on her in full force. Her mother and her brothers were no more. Her only consolation was Alimjan's letters which were full of sympathy, understanding, and the unspoken words of love.

In one of his letters Alimjan told her about his wartime friend.

"He and I have fought shoulder to shoulder almost from the start. We served together in Germany as well. His name is Grigory Ivanovich Petrov. He's been demobbed now. I've got to let you in on a little secret, Aikiz, which has helped us fight and win. It was a story Grigory and I took turns in telling one another. And with every telling the story grew longer.

"It was all about two girls back home, girls who took on the jobs of two certain soldiers when they were called up ... and who loved those soldiers a little, perhaps. The girls wrote nice letters to the soldiers. And with every letter our stories grew longer, more interesting and eventful. One of the girls was called Valya. Grigory quoted parts of her letters in his stories. The other was called Aikiz. Parts of her letters were

quoted by me. You can take my word for it: the stories we told each other helped us a lot when times were hard.

"The war has long been over. But the stories are not. They want a happy ending. Grigory has gone to the Volga country to find his, and I.... Don't be angry with me, Aikiz, for this queer letter, and to show you are not, please write and tell me all about little Lola."

Could she be angry? She did not quite appreciate his "queer letter" right away perhaps, for after all it was only a letter and not his voice speaking to her. The war had come to a victorious end, all the soldiers had come home, but Alimjan was kept with the troops in Germany.

Aikiz was now in the third year of her correspondence course, but the remaining two demanded all she had and made it imperative for her to go to the institute in Tashkent as a full-time student. On the other hand, Aikiz thought she would be a renegade if she abandoned the kolkhoz now when rehabilitation of national economy was just beginning. Aikiz wrote to Alimjan, begging him to solve her doubts for her

But it was not Alimjan who showed her the way.

One day in July Aikiz was working out in the fields when suddenly she saw Kadyrov, the kolkhoz chairman, hurrying towards her with a very excited look on his face.

"Come here a moment, Aikiz," he said. "Tell me the truth—did you write to the District Party Committee?"

"No. Why?"

Kadyrov did not believe her evidently, and went on questioning her.

"You may have made some complaint or something, eh?"

Aikiz resented his attitude.

"I have made no complaints yet. But I'm not sure that someone won't. You do think of nothing but your own glory and prestige." She blurted out and walked back to her job.

Kadyrov trotted at her side and, flapping his arms, chattered nervously.

"Where are you off to? They've telephoned for you to come to the District Party Committee office, you know. But the question is, what for? Why? That's what's so puzzling. They want you urgently, you're to go straight to the first secretary. It's urgent, mind you, and it's the first secretary who wants to see you. That can mean only one thing—you're in for it. They'll give you trouble."

"But why, what have I done?" Aikiz asked. "Have we done anything wrong, or isn't our work satisfactory?"

Kadyrov was obviously upset.

"Don't you worry, they're never slow in finding fault with us," he said despondently and shook his head. But suddenly he brightened up for an idea gave him heart. "But perhaps it only concerns you personally? Perhaps it's something in the Komsomol line? You'd better hurry, I've told them to get a horse ready for you."

When Aikiz walked into the office, the first secretary got up to shake hands with her. He was a short, grey-haired man with the sickly pallor of a convalescent.

He gave her a long look as he shook her hand.

"Jurabayev," he said.

"Oh, Comrade Jurabayev, how you have changed!" Aikiz could not hold back her amazement.

Before the war Jurabayev had often come to their kolkhoz and visited her father too. Aikiz had heard only a little while ago that, badly wounded and demobbed, he had come back to his post of first secretary. But the change in his appearance was indeed startling.

"Do you think *you* haven't changed?" he said with a kind smile. "When I saw you last, four years ago, you were a mere child. Well, tell me, how is everything with you?"

Strangely, Aikiz, found it easy to tell this man of all she had gone through in those four years, of what she had suffered when death carried away her two brothers and her mother. Jurabayev listened in silence, without interrupting.

He spoke with genuine warmth when she had finished.

"I know all about you, Aikiz," he said. "I do sympathize with you in your loss. I knew your brothers well, and Khalbibi I remember too. The war has bereaved us of fine, honest people. There is hardly a family that has not borne a loss."

There was a minute of silence. It suddenly occurred to Aikiz that here was a man who had suffered infinitely more than she had, a man who had fought in the war from beginning to end and had faced death. And this man was offering his sympathy to *her*!

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"How are you doing at the institute?" Jurabayev asked.

"I've passed on to the fourth course," Aikiz replied, somewhat surprised at this unexpected turn the conversation had taken.

"Correspondence course?"

"Yes."

"How do you intend to continue?"

Aikiz shrugged.

"I'll have to go on with the correspondence course," she said. "The kolkhoz is short-handed."

"But in our opinion you should go to Tashkent."

Aikiz looked up, surprised. She was afraid she had not heard right.

"What do you mean?" she stammered. "You said that in your ... but why...."

"Does it surprise you that the District Party Committee takes an interest in training our own specialists?" Jurabayev said and smiled. "You don't think very highly of it, I must say."

"I'm sorry. What I meant was..." Aikiz mumbled.

"No, I must hold it against you," Jurabayev said, amused at the girl's confusion. "I shall even say more: I insist on your going to Tashkent."

And so Aikiz's dream came true. After two years of strenuous study at the Tashkent institute—long days and short nights—she came home to Altyn-Sai a full-fledged agronomist and member of the Communist Party.

The kolkhoz had changed. The young had grown up and the old had become wiser with experience. Aikiz

hardly knew Lola: the romping fatty was now an attractive, grown-up girl. She sang and laughed as merrily as ever, but she was earnest where her choice of career was concerned. She wanted to become a horticulturist, and could always be found in the orchard helping the old gardener Halim-bobo and learning all she could from him. As for Mikhri, she had not grown out of her shyness and awkwardness. The three met like loving sisters.

A few months after she came back, Aikiz was nominated the village deputy and later elected chairman of the Altyn-Sai village Soviet.

This was a grave responsibility. Often she would saddle Baichibar in the middle of the night and ride to the district office to seek Jurabayev's support and counsel. She'd find his desk lamp burning, the wristwatch he always took off when working glittering on top of a pile of papers in front of him. "I've bungled the whole thing," would be Aikiz's despairing thought as she rode through the night. She believed that it was her mediocrity, her utter incapability of handling a big job that was causing all her troubles. She would face Jurabayev, despondent and perplexed, fighting back her ready tears, and wait for him to speak.

"Well, Aikiz, what's up now?" he would ask. "Pour out your troubles. The Party will help, never forget that."

The Party! Was there anything more sacred in life? Aikiz could not imagine living outside of the Party, outside of its ranks. She had been guided by Jurabayev to follow Lenin's great teaching in her work, her pri-

vate life, and she tried with all her heart and soul to do her modest share in the building up of communism.

The more experience Aikiz gained, the clearer it became to her that there was no future for the submontane regions unless water was brought to them. The problem of irrigation was taking an ever more prominent place in her correspondence with Alimjan.

It worried her that he suddenly stopped writing after a five years' steady correspondence, and had left her last two letters unanswered.

But one day, after a month of anxious surmises, she suddenly saw Alimjan, as she rode through the thicket of nut-trees at the foot of the Kok-Tau. The soldier was returning home.

VI

The meeting of the kolkhoz Party organization was due to begin in half an hour. Alimjan was alone in the small sunny room, hunched over his desk, twisting and tousling his hair as usual in moments of concentration, jotting down the plan of his speech and trying to decide upon the most convincing words to use.

He heard someone come in.

"Hello, Alimjan-aka."

"Hello, Aikiz," he said and shook the girl's hand.

The confidence in her manner was good to see. Alimjan knew it all beforehand. Aikiz's proposed undertaking would be objected to stubbornly and strongly by

Kadyrov. Umurzak-ata would not refrain from voicing his doubts to Aikiz either: he stuck to his conviction that she was risking her prestige by drawing people into an undertaking the success of which was more than doubtful.

Not all had faith in Aikiz's plan, she knew it, but rather than lose heart she seemed to have found a new source of strength in herself to fight to the end.

"What a girl!" Alimjan thought, admiring her.

He offered her a chair.

"Well, what's new? How's work?" he asked.

"Everything's fine."

"Is your father still adamant?"

"There would have been no such thing as difference of opinion if people could see eye to eye in everything at once. People are all different, you know."

Her prim tone was that of a schoolteacher, but her eyes betrayed her with their twinkle.

"Never mind," she said in her usual manner. "We'll convince him that we are right and he'll agree. Don't you know Father? I worked very hard on my speech. Here it is. Look, it's a regular novel."

Aikiz put two exercise books sewn together on the table.

Alimjan began to read, but he had not gone very far when the members of the Party organization began to arrive for the meeting.

Kadyrov, the chairman of the kolkhoz, a short, round-shouldered man with exceptionally long, strong arms, went on talking to the tractor brigade leader, Bekbuta,

as he walked in. There was a frown on Kadyrov's face and mistrust in his eyes.

"It's only schoolboys and dreamers who can think so!" he said irritably to Bekbuta as he strode into the room.

His voice was a deep growl. He took his time pushing back the chair and seating himself.

But Bekbuta refused to be snubbed.

"Dear Comrade Kadyrov," he said. "I am not much younger than you are, and so my schoolboy days are long past. It does seem to me, though, that some of our comrades have come to a sort of mental standstill. Their minds just won't function. And it isn't their schoolboyishness either, believe me, it's something else, which would bear looking into."

Although the two men were almost of an age, Bekbuta seemed young and vigorous in comparison. Like all the other kolkhoz men, Bekbuta wore a robe belted with a dark brown kerchief, and soft tall boots with the trousers tucked in. Kadyrov on the other hand preferred clothes of a military cut. But just as these trim clothes failed to give smartness to Kadyrov, who was badly running too fat, so Bekbuta's robe failed to disguise the man's neat and energetic movements. Bekbuta, it must be said, had been demobbed just lately.

His brusque and pointed reply startled Kadyrov. The chairman kept his glare on Bekbuta's face while he searched his mind for something really stinging in reply. But before he could bring anything out, Alimjan rapped the table with his pencil, requested silence and opened the meeting.

"The question up for discussion today comprises three problems," he began. "The first—clearing the springs. The second—construction of a canal and reservoir. And the third—development of virgin soil for cotton planting. We shall irrigate this soil with spring water. All of you already have a general idea of our far-reaching plans. Before debating the question though, I suggest we hear what Comrade Umurzakova has to say."

Aikiz stood up. She seemed calm enough, rather pale perhaps. She put her notebook on the edge of Alimjan's table, and the pages rustled as she opened it.

She raised her head and met Kadyrov's surly look.

This disconcerted her.

"He'll do his best to tear my proposal to pieces, he has no faith in this. He's always like that...." Aikiz felt her thoughts getting confused. In order to pull herself together, she turned away from Kadyrov and there was Bekbuta, looking at her with friendliness and approval.

Aikiz closed her notebook and said:

"Our kolkhoz grows wheat on unirrigated tracts of land up on the hills. That's all we do. Our hands are tied because of our everlasting droughts which make it impossible for us to enlarge our fields or struggle for higher crop yields. Moreover, we are deprived of the chance to follow the occupation native to us: that of planting cotton. And yet our village lies amid thousands and thousands of acres of fertile soil, suitable for cotton growing. What ties our hands then? What is the obstacle? What makes us fall behind? Nothing but our lack of water. The whole question hinges on water to irrigate our fields."

"That's rather stale news," Kadyrov growled. "But where are we to get the water?"

"There *is* water!" Aikiz cried with a lilt in her voice and slapped her hand down on her notebook. "There is water! Don't we know that hundreds of cubic metres of water are carried down the streams during high flood? Doesn't it hurt us to see all that water going to waste! So why not retain it? Why not clear the springs? If we act like true Bolsheviks we shall bring the water into our fields."

"Dreams, childish dreams," Kadyrov mumbled to himself but so that all should hear. He even turned away from Aikiz to show her that her prattle annoyed him.

"May I remind you, Comrade Kadyrov, that a Party organization meeting has to be treated with respect," Alimjan said quietly.

Meanwhile, Aikiz unrolled a large sheet of paper and spread it out on the table. This was a detailed map of the locality, showing all the land belonging to their kolkhoz. Everyone got up and crowded closer to see it.

"Here it is, the map of our lands," Aikiz went on, her mind made up to ignore Kadyrov's nasty jibes. "I wish to draw your attention to the gully this stream flows through. There are a number of buried springs in it. You all know how shepherds up in the mountains water their herds: they clear the springs and so increase the inflow of water. We made a study of several springs in the Yangok-Sai valley. A rough estimate showed that if we cleared them, dug a canal to our fields and gave them water, our grain farm would soon be changed into a cotton-planting one."

The men hung on Aikiz's words, and even Kadyrov's eyes lighted up for a moment with a tiny spark of interest. "I wish I could rouse him. But never mind," Aikiz thought with a little smile, "if we don't move him now, we will later. And if we don't ... he'll only have himself to blame, our people won't tolerate those who hamper their progress." She felt easier in her mind.

"Proceed, comrade chairman," Bekbuta said eagerly. "It's a great thing, you're proposing."

"Yes, it is a great thing," Aikiz said. "Tens of thousands of cubic metres of water are carried past our village year after year, and we don't do anything about it but bewail our waterless state. And yet these cubic metres of water present stupendous natural resources. Not our fields alone but also those of the neighbouring kolkhozes could be irrigated with this supply. We hold great wealth, comrades. The time has come for us to take the matter in our own hands and reclaim this water which is going to waste. I shall say more: we have not the right to waste that water. Look, this is what we ought to do...."

With a quick movement Aikiz unrolled and spread out another sheet of paper.

This map was drafted with much less skill than the first. Nevertheless, it gave one rather a good idea of the locality where the Yangok-Sai, rushing down the mountain, met the valley. Two thick red lines marked the route of the future canal.

"This is where we shall detour the water into our fields," Aikiz said, tracing the line with her finger. "It will radically change the economy of our village. Our

kolkhoz will be enabled to plant cotton and alfalfa, and then all roads will be open to us. The whole thing hinges on water. We must not let a drop of it slip through our fingers. Now from this point here we shall send the water into our submontane regions—I'm speaking of the land belonging to all the kolkhozes here. We must draw everyone into the work of clearing springs and digging canals. We cannot afford to lose a minute. Not a minute. Everything depends on our efficiency. If we manage well, we'll plant cotton this year."

This was no fanciful dream, it was a well thought out, feasible plan.

Everyone was silent for a few minutes studying the maps and weighing the matter up.

The first to speak was Bekbuta. It seemed an effort for him to tear his eyes away from the two red lines showing the route of the future canal. Before he began to speak he cleared his throat and fingered the edge of the table.

"Is it right that these springs will give us all that water?" he asked. "You're not misjudging them, are you, Aikiz?"

"No, Bekbuta, there's no question of misjudgement," Aikiz answered as if she were giving a solemn vow. "These springs will give considerably more water than I have told you. The figures given here are purposely underestimated. And still they bring one to ... how shall I put it ... to breath-taking conclusions. You must also bear in mind that we have not taken the Kok-Bulak into account at all. That one spring alone, if we succeed

in reclaiming it, will give us as much water as all the others put together."

"Why, of course!" Bekbuta broke in. "I remember the Kok-Bulak. The water used to gush straight out of the rock so powerfully the earth seemed to quake. The column of water was as thick as a camel's neck. If we could reclaim that spring it would really be something."

"And we shall if we make a combined effort," Aikiz said.

But at this Kadyrov could no longer hold back his annoyance.

"Big speeches always stretch a small point," he said with an obstinate frown on his face. "So let's keep to the point and not amuse ourselves with big speeches. The Kok-Bulak has been choked and buried under by the basmach bands of Asfendiar-beg. People say that he had a British officer for adviser. It was no amateurishly done job either. The rocks above were blown up. And now it's impossible to tell exactly where the spring had once issued. How much earth and stone has to be dug up in order to get to the spring's source? Have you got all that reckoned, and did it total up well? At a very rough guess it would take at least six months to do it. And where are you going to get the manpower? Where are you going to get all that spare time?" Kadyrov sat down abruptly.

"Why have you stopped half-way, Comrade Kadyrov?" Alimjan said. "We want to hear your comprehensive and clear criticism of Comrade Umurzakova's proposal. Make it well-founded and constructive. We're holding a Party organization meeting. Speak your mind and don't make

random remarks. I give you the floor, Comrade Kadyrov."

The chairman of the kolkhoz unhurriedly got to his feet. He spread his hands on the table, palms down, leaned forward slightly, and slowly ran his eye over the gathering. His expression was stony. He began as if he were forcing himself to speak.

"Naturally, no one would refuse water. Water is badly needed. Why, I...."

He suddenly raised his voice.

"Why, I would walk barefoot across the burning sands of Kyzyl-Kum to get that water! Why, I..." he cried. "Why, I would champion Umurzakova without a moment's hesitation! What's stopping me then? Umurzakova proposes that we clear the springs, but this is not a level-headed, well-reasoned proposal. It's a moot question. The Yangok-Sai's water supply is very frugal, in summer you can hardly get a mouthful. Are we justified in starting on this great undertaking without giving it due consideration? Why has it never occurred to anyone before us to water fields with spring water? Because more research has to be made into this question, or perhaps because enough research has been made to abandon the prospect as unworthy of serious thought. Had it been possible to irrigate fields with spring water, our scientists would have told us to do so long ago. Our government would have spared no expense either. But no one has told us we could do it. Therefore, we should not be too hasty. Remember the saying: slowly but surely does it. Let them try it elsewhere first, and then we'll follow in their tracks...."

"Let the others attack, while we doze away in the rear. That's a good way to fight, I must say," Bekbuta called out scornfully.

Alimjan's accusing look cut him short. Kadyrov's reaction was that of a bull to a red rag.

"What sort of talk is this: some go into attack and others doze away at home?" he cried heatedly. "What are you trying to hint at? We'll be doing our own job on the home front. Perhaps the reason why I wasn't called up was because there was no one to do my job. It's not just anyone's job.... And it's only fools who rush into attack without any preparation. Supposing we start clearing the springs and suddenly we see that the thing is not worth a drop of sweat? We'll take the men off field work and bungle the sowing campaign, that's all. As for the effort this undertaking will require, I'll tell you now that it will not be worth the trouble because there's too little water. We'll be notorious the district over. This is a toilsome, labour-taking job and we're short-handed as it is. We shan't be able to manage alone. Shall we call our neighbours in to help? I'd shirk it, it's too much of a hazard. And then who's going to agree to help? They all have more than enough to cope with. I move against Umurzakova's proposal. Definitely against it!"

Having made his speech, Kadyrov sank heavily into his chair, which creaked under his weight. For a few moments his loud breathing was the only sound in the room.

Bekbuta took the floor next.

"I disagree. We cannot put off this undertaking: it's clear-cut and holds a great future for us," he said resolutely. "We shan't mind our neighbours either. Besides, I'm sure they'll come and offer to help us as soon as they learn what we've set out to do."

This was just what Aikiz had been hoping to hear.

After Bekbuta, the other members took the floor one after another and all moved for immediate commencement of the excavations. Kadyrov was the only one who voted against. His expression clearly said that he was unaffected by anything anyone thought, that he firmly held to his conviction and was as certain as ever that he was right. He was incapable of taking a long view, or rather he did not wish to do so. The contours of the kolkhoz lands shown on the map left him as unimpressed as any other pencilled line on a sheet of paper; he saw no visions of a blue, clear canal, or slim threads of ditches brimming with spring water branching off it. He saw no lush, new orchards on land that had never been watered before, nor a green sea of cotton rolling away to the horizon.

As one speech followed the next, it became clear to Alimjan that the one he had prepared to deliver in support of Aikiz's proposal was superfluous. Her proposal needed no support.

The Party organization passed a resolution to clear the springs, dig a canal, build a dam and a reservoir on the Yangok-Sai.

Kadyrov came out into the street, shaken and furious. He had no clear understanding of what had really happened. Alimjan had put up Aikiz's proposal to the

vote. All the members had raised their hands, he was the only one who had not. He remembered that well. He remembered that when Alimjan had asked: "Anyone voting against?" he had defiantly raised his hand far above his head. He remembered a split second of embarrassment when he met the looks of the other members. His arm had dropped. But instantly he had been angry with himself, angry because his behaviour was inconsistent and lacked dignity, because he had failed to convince them, to make them follow his lead and vote against Aikiz's proposal. Alimjan and Aikiz were mere greenhorns. This was just a new toy they were playing with. Not all that was new had to be acted upon though. The new was good only when it had withstood the test. So thought Kadyrov, a man of great experience and unshakeable prestige, kolkhoz chairman of good and long standing.

Gradually he recovered his balance, and his rage gave way to that feeling of morbid irritability when everyone appears hateful and obtuse and he alone is shrewd and clever. He considered his attitude to Aikiz unbiassed and his behaviour at the meeting blameless. While he felt no personal dislike for the girl, the very thought of Alimjan made him fume.

"Who's he to lord it over me?" Kadyrov said to himself.

Alimjan's popularity dated back to the day he came home from Germany, and was crowned by his being elected secretary of the kolkhoz Party organization. Quite frankly, Alimjan was an enigma to Kadyrov. "What is he after?" he wondered. "We are quite well

off, our kolkhoz is thought of very highly in the district, even if we don't plant any cotton. To be quite honest, there's less trouble without it. But no, they refuse to listen to me, they're set on dragging the kolkhoz down untrodden paths. I'm a man of experience, I've been chairman since the very first. Alimjan is young and raw, he's built up no prestige yet, but there he goes setting our people against me, the very people who have entrusted the management of the kolkhoz to me! It was I who set up the kolkhoz! It was under my management that it grew in esteem, wealth and fame. I've got prestige everywhere, and now this young whelp is digging pitfalls for me, and the people follow him blindly. They follow him only to trip and fall in the very pit he's digging for me!"

"So you want to push me down and climb into my job instead, do you? Envy gives you no peace, does it?" Kadyrov was thinking, prompted by the malice in him.

He clearly saw through Alimjan's ambitious schemes. A fever shook him. He came to his own gate but stared at it with unseeing eyes.

He went into the house and locked the door.

In the front room there was a nickel-plated bed with a good spring mattress, a silk bedspread and a pile of snow-white pillows topping it. But underneath this modern bed peeped an old-fashioned cradle, of the type babies were kept tied to in the old days, crippling their frail little bones. A table covered with an immaculate white cloth was pushed up to the window, and it was very obviously never in family use. There was also a

splendid wireless set, a large mirror on the wall, a bright rich carpet on the floor, and a neatly plastered brick stove. All this was spotless and meant to prove the owner's cultural standards.

The left side of the room, though, was fitted up with a *sandal* covered with a grimy blanket, and was evidently in constant use. This was a primitive arrangement: a squat, broad table was placed over a hole dug in the mud floor which was filled with hot coals when the weather turned cold, and then the whole family would sit and warm themselves on the table, pushing their feet under the blanket covering it.

Kadyrov sat on a bench and, puffing out his cheeks with the strain, began to pull off his tall boots. After no little effort he got them off and threw them under the bed.

When he had recovered his breath after this struggle he produced his tobacco case made out of a tiny dried pumpkin. He pulled out the stopper and shook the case, slapping the bottom with his hand. But there was not a grain of *nasvai** in it. This so maddened Kadyrov that he hurled it against the door, scattering the floor with bits of bright yellow pumpkin. He heaved a deep sigh. At last he had worked off his rage on something.

He pulled off his tunic and flung it on top of the radio. Next he took off his smart military breeches and

* *Nasvai*—home-grown tobacco which is neither smoked nor chewed, but placed under the tongue and sucked.—*Tr.*

kicked them under the table. He stretched his hand to get his soiled silk robe off a nail in the wall, and wrapped himself up in it. Now he threw one of the snow-white pillows down on the old felt rug in front of the *sandal* and stretched out on the floor, brooding on the unfairness of the world rising up in arms against him.

VII

It was long past midday when the two cars belonging to the kolkhoz drove up to the building of the District Party Committee. Two other cars were already parked in front of it: a brand-new, shiny Pobeda and a humble, battered M-1 with bent and patched mudguards.

Aikiz and Umurzak-ata got out of their Moskvich. The other car was a Pobeda driven by Kadyrov, with Alimjan and Smirnov, the engineer in charge of the district waterworks department, in the back seat. Kadyrov did not say a word during the whole trip. He pretended to be so engrossed in his driving that he could not be bothered with what the other two were saying about the construction project.

Kadyrov got out of the car and walked up and down to stretch his legs. He turned to Alimjan, indicating the Pobeda and M-1 with a meaningful nod, and said gruffly:

"Usmanov of the October Kolkhoz is here already. And the Victory's here ahead of us too."

"There you are," Alimjan answered with a laugh. "And you were afraid we would have to do the whole

job all alone. Our neighbours beat us to it, they were the first to come. That goes to show they're as keen on it as we are. Your fears have proved groundless."

Without answering, Kadyrov started up the front steps.

The five representatives of Altyn-Sai walked into the building together and made for the office of Jurabayev, the first secretary. They met him in the waiting room though where he was saying good-bye to a large group of people.

After exchanging cordial greetings with the representatives of Altyn-Sai, Jurabayev led the way into his office

The first secretary wore a tunic and riding breeches of fine, pale grey cloth, and a pair of light canvas boots. He walked in a manner peculiar to old cavalrymen.

"I'm sorry you weren't here earlier, my friends," Jurabayev said. "I had a rather curious conversation with those people you have just seen in the waiting room. That was a group of the district's best schoolteachers. Well, choose your own seats. No introductions are necessary, I think, you all know one another well."

The other people in the room were the chairmen of the kolkhozes October, Victory and May Day, and Sultanov, chairman of the District Executive Committee. Everyone bandied jokes and laughed as they settled down in their chairs, all except Kadyrov who chose a seat apart and away from the rest and, wearing a sullen frown, remained silent during the course of the whole meeting.

Jurabayev sat down and continued with what he had begun to tell them.

"Yes, we had a very interesting talk, interesting and instructive. Just think of it," he addressed Umurzak-ata but watched Aikiz and Alimjan from the corner of his eye. "It appears that we got so carried away with our farming economy that we forgot all about our schools. Never gave them a thought. And the regrettable results of this negligence were not slow in coming. In our Altyn-Sai school alone, eight pupils failed in their exams last year, and this year there are liable to be more. How did that happen? What were the Party organization, the board of the kolkhoz, and the village Soviet about? What have you got to say to this, Comrade Umurzakova?"

Aikiz looked crushed. She had deserved it.

"I forgot about the school, Comrade Jurabayev." She bravely made a clean breast of it. "I neglected a very important duty."

Jurabayev looked at Alimjan and his eyes seemed to say: "It's your fault more than anyone else's."

"It's my fault," Alimjan said shamefacedly. "We did discuss the question of attendance once, but we never got round to the question of progress."

"Whether it's your fault, her fault, or my fault, doesn't make it any better. It's the fault of all of us," Jurabayev said in a harsh tone and nervously lit a cigarette. "We spend all our days worrying about farm management, but can't manage the time to help bring up our children. What have you to say to this, Umurzak-ata?"

"Schools should be our primary concern, my son. We should not forget about it even in sleep. Without learning we shall not be able to build a new life," the old man replied.

No one said a word. Aikiz and Alimjan looked downcast. There was nothing they could say, Jurabayev was right. He ought to have been even sharper with them, for it was too late in the day to right the wrong that year.

The room was stuffy in spite of the wide open windows. Jurabayev unhooked the collar of his tunic and wiped his neck with his handkerchief. A wide purple scar showed close to his collar bone.

"It's that old wound of his," Alimjan thought and mechanically felt the hard ridge of his own scar through the thin silk of his shirt. He had been badly wounded at Brest.

"I wonder what could have hit him?" Alimjan went on thinking, as he tried to get a better look at Jurabayev's scar. "It's neither a bullet wound nor a shell splinter.... It's a bayonet or knife thrust. I remember thinking of that scar of his ever since I was a kid but I never ventured to ask him about it. I suppose he got it in hand-to-hand fighting, or in attack...."

It flattered Alimjan to know that he, too, just like Jurabayev, carried the scars of wounds on his body, those cruel marks of a soldier's valour.

He recalled Jurabayev's past. He was well acquainted with it because in the pre-war elections to the Supreme Soviet Alimjan had taken part in the Altyn-Sai election campaign, and Jurabayev had been the district's candidate. Jurabayev had the glorious past of a fighter for the Revolution. For many years he had served in the Red Cavalry. In the turbulent days of 1920, Frunze sent the cadets of Lenin's Military School he had recently founded to Eastern Bokhara to fight the basmach bands. Jurabayev

was one of those cadets. Everyone knew that many a basmach head was felled with the Red commander's flashing sabre.

Later, Jurabayev took a five-year course of study to train for a Party worker. All the young Communists in the district, including Alimjan, were products of Jurabayev's wise and careful guidance. When the war broke out this old Red cavalryman was back in the fighting lines again. In 1944, after a bad wound and a long hospital stretch, Jurabayev returned to his old post having refused other, more prominent ones offered to him. The old cavalryman's iron constitution triumphed over the aftereffects of the wound. And now, at least to look at, he was perfectly fit and appeared younger than he really was; but for the grey in his wavy black hair and the network of tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, one would never have guessed that the man was well over forty. Having held the same post for more than ten years, Jurabayev knew his district thoroughly.

His voice, breaking the rather long silence, cut short Alimjan's train of thoughts.

"Well then, how do you propose to start your fight for water, comrades? Look at the commotion you have caused! The chairmen of your three neighbouring kolkhozes couldn't get here fast enough. They're filing complaints against you."

Aikiz was utterly confused now. Jurabayev spoke in a serious tone of voice, and she failed to understand what they had done to bring those complaints about. The three kolkhozes—October, Victory and May Day—all belonged to the Altyn-Sai District, she had spoken to their chair-

men only the day before, telling them of her own kolkhoz's decision to start clearing the springs. And all three had given her their warm approval.

Alimjan, too, was puzzled.

"Yes, they have, they have," Jurabayev repeated; he stubbed his cigarette in the ash tray and smiled. "They came here and told me that the Stalin Kolkhoz was planning to become sole owners of all the water in the mountain streams, and that the Stalin Kolkhoz was going to build a dam for themselves alone, for their own private needs. What do you say to that, comrades?"

This bantering speech cheered Aikiz up. She felt her old confidence returning, she pulled her briefcase up closer to get out her notes and make an answering speech, but then she changed her mind and addressed Jurabayev simply, glancing at the kolkhoz chairmen out of the corner of her eye.

"There's no need for the October, Victory and May Day kolkhozes to worry," she said. "The Stalin Kolkhoz is only taking the initiative, but all the others will have to join in when the work begins. We'll need a great deal of assistance. And when we get as far as water . . . why, we'll share it equally among us."

"We'll give you every assistance," Usmanov, the chairman of the October Kolkhoz, was quick to reciprocate. "We'll come out in full force with all our tractors and machines. Just give the word where and when you want us."

"Our earlier tentative plans and estimates have already become outdated," Aikiz said. "Comrade Smirnov has put us right in this for which we are extremely grateful to

him. He has explored the valleys and springs thoroughly and has summed up his conclusions, and so I think it would be better if Comrade Smirnov himself reported on his findings."

Smirnov slowly rose to his feet. He was a tall, lean, fair-haired man with very bright, dark-blue eyes, and a wide chin with a mole almost the size of a pea moving up and down it when he spoke. His clothes were casual: roomy trousers equally comfortable for riding or mountain climbing, tucked into tall boots, and an open-necked shirt. Smirnov was fifty but he was so energetic and quick that he seemed much younger. His rolled up sleeves revealed arms that were bony but exceptionally strong.

He took his time opening his battered field case, pulling out a sheath of papers pinned together, removing his glasses and polishing them with his handkerchief.

He now began to speak in a pleasant though rather husky voice, typical of people who have to talk loudly and often out in the open. He had a way of beginning every speech he made as if he were merely continuing a conversation started long ago in which there were certain points he disagreed with.

"I think," Smirnov said, "that our comrades from Altyn-Sai have underestimated all the possibilities that may be disclosed to them in the process of construction. They have modestly made their stake on the Yangok-Sai alone and the springs located in its valley. In my opinion, the project should be expanded and improved upon. We should join up the waters of the Uzun-Sai and Yangok-Sai. Comrades, it's up to us to direct all the waters of the Altyn-Sai into the fertile lands of our kolkhozes. It's

difficult but it can be done. The first thing to do is to make deep excavations in the Yangok-Sai valley where the springs are located. The deeper we dig the more new springs will come to light, and the more water we shall obtain. According to our estimate, even in their present neglected state the springs of the Yangok-Sai could cater for approximately two hundred acres of irrigated fields. When cleared to a considerable depth the amount of water will be increased tenfold. In this way we shall have an ample supply of water within the year. The waters of the Kok-Bulak, the greatest of the springs, do not come into our calculations. According to the old-timers though, that spring alone is twice the volume of the whole of Yangok-Sai. But the reclamation of this spring is attended by great difficulties and at the moment I shall refrain from asserting that our attempts to clear the Kok-Bulak will be crowned with success. Nevertheless, the Stalin Kolkhoz must appoint its strongest team to the Kok-Bulak site."

"Our Party organization has entrusted me to take charge of the team appointed to the Kok-Bulak site," Alimjan broke into Smirnov's speech. "On behalf of all of us, I give you my word that we shall do everything in our power to restore the Kok-Bulak."

Jurabayev knew that Alimjan never gave vain promises, and welcomed his avowal with a nod of encouragement.

"Tell me, Comrade Smirnov," Jurabayev said. "How do you propose utilizing the waters of the Altyn-Sai to irrigate the submontane regions? That is, taking into consid-

eration that the Altyn-Sai runs through a deep gully. I believe it's twenty metres deep if not more."

"That's right. It's more than twenty," Smirnov replied. "To be exact, the floor of the gully is 24 metres below the level of the submontane region. But this need not frighten the Altyn-Sai kolkhozes," he turned to Aikiz and Alimjan. "The gully is deep but narrow. Besides, the Altyn-Sai is quite an abundant river. In other words, it's worth while. On this spot here," he produced a drawing and placed it in front of Jurabayev, "we've got to build a dam and lock the Altyn-Sai into its gully. It's steep and narrow and will soon fill up behind the dam. This is where we'll have to dig the canal. Considering its depth in front of the lock, we shall have to raise the water to 21, at most 22 metres, no more."

"But the dam, what about the dam?" Jurabayev said. "It'll have to be a huge thing. Twenty-five metres high, it says here. Shall we be able to manage with our own resources?"

Smirnov could feel the tense looks of the kolkhoz leaders on his face. He made his reply to Jurabayev.

"We shall," he said. "We shall build the body of the dam of stone. There's any amount of material right there on the spot, we've got dynamite and we've demolition men. And the kolkhozes will provide the manpower...."

"We shall!" the chairmen readily agreed.

Sultanov, the chairman of the Executive Committee, pushed back his armchair and softly walked up to Smirnov and stood behind him looking into the engineer's notes over his shoulder. Sultanov was a middle-aged, fat and rather flabby man, particular of his appearance to a

fault. Even in this heat he had not discarded his necktie and coat.

"What will it cost?" he asked bluntly when Smirnov had finished speaking.

Smirnov was ready for that question too.

"The cost will be impressive, of course," he said without a glance at his notes. "I've got it all figured out here. The total expense of excavating the springs, building the dam and canal will amount to approximately twenty-five or thirty thousand workday units. But in the course of the work our expenses may grow substantially—it is not inconceivable that upon clearing the boulder we may come up against solid rock."

Sultanov let out a thin whistle. He looked expectantly at all the kolkhoz chairmen in turn. But they were not daunted by the figures. They all nodded their agreement and placed their clenched hands on the table.

Jurabayev was hurriedly jotting something down.

"Are you planning to dig by hand?" he asked Aikiz.

"Yes, Comrade Jurabayev."

Jurabayev made a wry face. Umurzak-ata saw it and asked permission to speak. Holding his right hand to his heart, he got up, and addressed Jurabayev in a low voice:

"The people of our kolkhoz are determined to get the water. Our people are decided. I beg you kindly, my son, go over our calculations again, check them and see if the way we're planning to do it is right. And as for our zeal, have no anxiety. Once the people are determined to do something they will not go back on it. If we have no machines we'll do it with our hands. The people have many hands and they are all filled with strength. Advise

us, my son, how best to build and give us the word to start."

"And I, my dear Umurzak-ata, I was going to ask *your* advice. It's a serious business. Advise us how best to undertake it."

"What are you saying, son! How could an ignorant old man like me advise you! It's the learned men, the engineers who'll tell you how best to build. Here, Comrade Smirnov, for one. . . ."

"We always work on our engineers' advice," Jurabayev said with a smile. "But no matter how much we value their counsel, we should also appreciate the opinion of people as experienced in work and life as you, Umurzak-ata. We Communists make it a rule to consult the people on every matter, be it great or small. In this case too. The valley of the Yangok-Sai is deep, a lot of earth will be excavated. How shall we get it all up the steep banks from the bottom?"

"Why, on our backs, son. After all, it's not the first time we'd be doing it. Remember how the Ferghana Canal was built? Well, we'll just haul the earth up on our backs."

"We'll make use of horses and carts," Alimjan put in.

"And it will take you no less than two or three months to complete the job. And in the meanwhile it will be too late for sowing. You were going to set yourself the task of planting and growing cotton on the newly irrigated fields as early as this year, you know."

"Comrade Jurabayev," Smirnov interrupted. "I have based my calculations with a view to completing all the work of building the dam, excavating the springs and

digging the canal within thirty days. But to accomplish this, part of the jobs must be mechanized."

"Your demands are reasonable," Jurabayev agreed. "Machinery is essential. Without it we cannot hope to be through in time."

Sultanov was pacing the floor with measured steps.

"We'll give you all the machinery we have in the district," he said.

"If we only had an excavator! Even one would do," Alimjan voiced his hope.

This made Jurabayev roar with laughter.

"Oh, you people! One minute you were prepared to haul mountains away on your backs, and the next you want an excavator, no more no less!"

"We'll need an excavator when we come to digging the dam bed and cutting the canal," Smirnov said. "But I expect we could manage by hand while clearing the springs, on condition, of course, that we have belt conveyers. We need no less than four, providing one is very powerful. We'll use that one on the Kok-Bulak site."

"You'll have your four," Jurabayev promised. "It's a very good thing that you brought your estimates along, Comrade Smirnov. This evening we shall put the question up for discussion at the District Party Committee meeting, we'll pass a resolution and make it binding for all the local Party organizations to render you every assistance. It seems to me we should begin by using all the resources at our disposal to clear the springs and dig the canal, and in about ten days' time we shall start on

the dam. The fields are thirsting for water. The dam must be completed within thirty or forty days at the most. To do this we'll let you have three excavators. Another question: have you got it planned which fields will be the first to get the water?"

"Yes, and we've already begun clearing them," Aikiz replied quickly.

Jurabayev stood up. All the other members of the meeting followed suit.

"My dear friends," Jurabayev said with unconcealed emotion. "You are well aware, of course, that many of our kolkhozes situated in the submontane region are unable to plant cotton or make any strides at all because of the absence of water. But, besides these kolkhozes, we have hundreds of villages up in the mountains, in the very heart of the mountains so to say, who have no land suitable for cultivation. They need our help. In the conditions of our district, the only help we could offer them would be to leave the mountains and resettle in the valley. By bringing water to thousands of acres of land, you will bring prosperity to all those people. You are the first to begin the fight for water in our submontane regions. Your worthy initiative will blend into the great war against dry winds and droughts which the Soviet people are waging everywhere. Be ever daring, persistent, tireless and hardy, and victory will be yours. And your victory will light the way for others. They will see for themselves that only hard work and initiative will bring the water into their fields. I wish you success, comrades!"

VIII

The night before work was to begin Aikiz stayed till late at the village Soviet.

The prospect thrilled her. All that she had known till then, all that she had accomplished, appeared trivial and insignificant compared to what she was to do. She tried to picture the project as a whole, but in her mind the different jobs fell into isolated sections and she could not piece them together. There were moments when she was afraid she was not up to coping with the responsible part she was to play.

Smirnov was appointed director of the project, Aikiz his assistant and superviser of the dam-building section. All the kolkhozes formed teams of workmen, and the foremen made a thorough study of the locality they were to work in. Three of the belt conveyers promised by Jurabayev had already been delivered; the fourth and most powerful was expected in two or three days' time. They would have their excavators too, sooner than expected.

Aikiz was nervous. Tomorrow, at eight o'clock in the morning, an army of farmers was starting for the mountains to force life-giving water to stream into their arid lands. Tomorrow, Aikiz and the other Communists of Altyn-Sai would have their maturity of judgement, their ability to direct and rouse the people to a battle for water, put to the test.

Would they acquit themselves well in this test?

It was long past midnight when Aikiz left the office. The night was dark and so silent that Aikiz could hear her heart beating.

When she got home, she locked the gate behind her and quietly slipped into her own room so as not to disturb her father. The moment she lay down she fell into a dreamless sleep of utter exhaustion.

Aikiz was up when the windows were just beginning to turn grey. Standing in front of her mirror in the half-light, she plaited her hair and hastily put on her clothes.

Out in the courtyard, Umurzak-ata was fussing around the gurgling samovar.

"Good-morning, Father," Aikiz cried.

"Good-morning, my dear, good-morning, daughter," Umurzak-ata answered tenderly. "You're all ready, my beautiful one? Baichibar is excited, he won't even eat his clover. Wash your face and let's have breakfast, the people have been thronging the square since before dawn."

Aikiz ran to Baichibar and gave him a lump of sugar. Father and daughter sat down to breakfast laid on a small table covered with an old cloth.

From the street came the voices of men, the hoot of motor-car horns, the bleating of camels and the strident cries of donkeys. An army of farmers was mustering in the square, ready to storm the mountains.

Lorries and carts loaded with people were streaming noisily to the village Soviet from all the kolkhozes of Altyn-Sai. In the square in front of the building these streams merged into a billowing sea. The lorries and carts were decorated with red streamers and bunches of early spring flowers. Every arriving column was headed by a lorry flying the kolkhoz's banner fitted up on the driver's cab, and bringing its own orchestra. The musicians tried

their hardest, and the whole neighbourhood resounded with their discordant but lilting and jolly music.

Hoisted high above the roof of the village Soviet soared the national flag, just as if it were a state holiday. The people saw it many kilometres away and happily passed the news from one to the other: today the farmers of Altyn-Sai were to begin their fight for water!

Young boys and girls were dancing in the square when Aikiz came riding up to the village Soviet. The best dancers from the different kolkhozes stepped into the circle and demonstrated their skill, trying to outdo one another and get the biggest hand from the crowd watching them.

Aikiz tied Baichibar to the post and ran up the verandah steps. Alimjan, excited and smiling, came out of the front door.

"Hello, Aikiz," he said in a loud, cheerful voice. "See what's going on! And it's not yet seven. Even our old Kadyrov's attitude has changed. It must be his conscience. He's put three more men on my team, says he'll try and manage all by himself here."

This was the way she liked to see Alimjan best—resolute and full of life.

"Will the Kok-Bulak be ours?"

She said this so softly that only his loving heart could hear the question.

"We'll raze the whole of Kok-Tau if necessary, but we'll get to the Kok-Bulak," Alimjan answered as softly.

Their shoulders touching, they walked into the building. The hall was crammed.

The secretary of the village Soviet, a short, taciturn

youth, sat at a table ticking off the names of the arrivals.

"Is everyone here?" Aikiz asked him.

"We've 1,172 people so far. The May Day Kolkhoz has not arrived yet," the secretary replied.

"You shouldn't tell lies, young man," a hurt voice sounded behind Aikiz's back.

The chairman of the May Day Kolkhoz stepped up to the table.

"Here, put this down: the May Day Kolkhoz has arrived 376 men strong. Our kolkhoz has sent its best men."

Aikiz smiled and turned towards her own office. It was crowded as well. Smirnov and Alimjan sat at her desk, while the kolkhoz chairmen and team foremen stood about discussing the terms of their emulation agreements.

When Aikiz walked in, Smirnov got up and greeted her in formal tones.

"Three conveyers are already on their way to the construction site," he told her, "and the fourth one, for the Kok-Bulak site, is due this evening. Or, at the latest, tonight."

"In other words, just for today Alimjan's team will have to haul the stones up on their backs after all? No carts can get through there."

"Never mind," Alimjan called back. "Our backs won't break if we do a little hauling for a day before the conveyer arrives."

An emulation agreement was concluded between Alimjan's team and one from the May Day Kolkhoz.

They all poured out into the street. Aikiz, Smirnov, Alimjan and the chairmen of the kolkhozes took their posts at the head of their respective columns. Silk banners

fluttered softly. The musicians filed in behind them. Now the drums rolled, the trumpets blew, and with a loud "hurrah" the army, fifteen hundred strong, marched forward to storm the Kok-Tau Mountain.

IX

By midday, the old men of the Stalin Kolkhoz had a spacious tent rigged up on a steep hillock at the very foot of the mountain. Electricity was then put in, for this was to be the staff headquarters of the construction project.

It was already sunset when Aikiz arrived. She had spent the whole day riding from one site to the next, supervising the first day's work. She felt a happy release from all her doubts and worries, as though she had left a stuffy room and come out into the fresh air. Work was begun. Tons of earth were already excavated from the bottoms of the gullies and heaped on the banks.

Of course the people did not get into their stride yet: the wheel kept slipping out of its groove, but tomorrow it would run steadily and smoothly. The main thing was that work was begun.

Aikiz topped the hillock, jumped down from the saddle and let Baichibar nibble the young green grass.

The site for the staff headquarters was well chosen. One had a perfect view of both valleys—the Yangok-Sai and the Uzun-Sai. They were quite unrecognizable now. They seemed to have burst into flower with the bright-coloured shirts of the men, their steel mattocks flashing

in the sun. The girls who were carrying the earth away on barrows started a song. Like a wave rolling from afar it broke against the hill just below Aikiz. They sang:

No, I cannot be silent, my heart bids me: Sing!
Soar, my song, high up in the sky.
All the roads to joy are open to me,
Free as a bird am I.

The breezes of spring fly over the steppe,
Caressing our pretty girls,
With their sashes of silk and eyes like stars
And teeth like sparkling pearls.

We have grown in our land an orchard of joy
And it blooms like an almond-tree.
We have done away with the paranjah
All our motherland fair we can see.

Life is in bloom like an orchard in spring
Which no foe has the power to destroy.
We thank our beloved Soviet power
For the happiness we enjoy.

A man's voice, strong and true, now joined in. Aikiz closed her eyes. The song rang with confidence and cheer. Now more men joined in, and soon hundreds of voices soared from the bottom of the gullies up into the distant evening sky.

But the song did not ring alone: it blended in harmony with an orchestra of sounds—metal clanging, conveyers

creaking, voices calling, and stone crushing under the blows of sledge-hammers.

The age-old dream of man, strong in will, was coming true. There would be water.

Water, water.... Aikiz vividly saw the stream of released water breaking out of the gully with a roar and flooding the Altyn-Sai fields. She seemed to breathe in its freshness. Now the blue stream flowed freely and gladly through the cleared bed, but suddenly there were tall rocks blocking its way. The water smashed against them, raging and foaming. A spray leapt high, and the stream groaned furiously as it fought its way around the rocks.

Now Aikiz's imagination painted a picture of the submontane region, with the fields tilled for the first time, dotted with millions of cotton plants, and then another picture of great barns stocked high with cotton, as white as the mountain snow.

A sharp sound—a sledge-hammer blow crushing stone—broke into the girl's reverie. She came back to earth. It was already evening. How stealthily and swiftly it had fallen. Up on the hill the light still clung uncertainly, but the deep, narrow gullies were already swathed in dark purple shadows. Little by little the blows of the mattocks and the metallic clang of the machines died away. Hundreds of fires were lighted down in the valley, sending up an acrid smoke.

People's voices rang clearer and louder in the stillness.

Aikiz heard the sound of footsteps, the clatter of a stone rolling down the path. It was Smirnov and Alimjan slowly trudging up the hill.

One look at them was enough to tell Aikiz that they were worried and disappointed. She refrained from any questions.

The other foremen were due any minute now.

When everyone had arrived, a meeting was held in the tent to sum up the day's work. The lamp shed a dim and weak-willed sort of light over the table, while the rest of the place was swallowed up in gloom.

Smirnov was the first to speak.

"We have bungled the plan of today's work. What was the trouble? Why have we bungled it? I'll tell you why. Because too many men are busy doing auxiliary jobs. The foremen must take into account our sad experience of today and set matters right forthwith. As from tomorrow all available men are to start digging. That's one problem settled. The second one is that we have not yet given an unbroken rhythm to our work. The conveyers are not loaded to full capacity. It is our duty to correct that fault as early as tomorrow. Today, the poorest showings were those of Alimjan's team. Firstly, they had no conveyer, the banks are very steep there and so most of their time and strength was spent hauling up the earth. Secondly, it's a very difficult section. It's nothing but rock. We'll have to blast it. The demolition men have already arrived. They'll blast it at dawn. A powerful conveyer will be delivered to us in the morning. Therefore tomorrow it'll be up to Alimjan and his team to better their showings."

Smirnov gave them the details of the next day's plan and resumed his seat.

The foremen spoke next. They criticized themselves strongly for their own mistakes, and also corrected the other teams in theirs. The gloomy tent seemed to come alight with their enthusiasm. Listening to them, Smirnov no longer doubted the men's unshakeable confidence in their own strength and ultimate victory.

Alimjan was the only one to remain apart and silent. When there was a lull in the noise Aikiz thought she could hear his laboured breathing.

He took the floor when the discussion was over.

"The summing up showed that my team came last today," he said. "We were badly handicapped by not having a conveyer. That is so, but it was not the worst. The worst was that we had to pry up the stones. Some of them are no smaller than a good-sized house. Neither a lorry nor a conveyer could haul them away. The basmach men, you will remember, blew up that great rock overhanging the Kok-Bulak. It was cleverly done, shrewdly and treacherously."

Aikiz saw that he was nervous and frustrated with the failure he had met that day. She was impatient for the meeting to come to an end so she could say a word of encouragement to the man she loved. She watched the foremen file out, but there was no Alimjan—he must have slipped out first. She hurried out of the tent certain that he was waiting for her up on the hill. But he was not there either. She felt so terribly hurt and disappointed she wanted to cry. For a while she stayed up on the hill gazing down at the fires burning in the valley and slowly going out, one after another.

Night was falling on the earth.

Suddenly she heard Smirnov's shout in the darkness below.

"Alimjan! Wait a minute, you young devil! Wait for me. They're not going to blast it this minute. It's tomorrow morning."

Aikiz could not catch Alimjan's answering call.

She was disappointed that he had not waited to speak to her. And hurt too. But she was glad that he had not needed sympathy, that he was as confident and stubborn as ever.

X

The sun was as hot as in summer. The heat sucked the earth dry. But the green grass in the plain was not shrivelled yet.

Alimjan's team, working deep down in the narrow gully of the Yangok-Sai, did not suffer from the heat. There was always a fresh breeze blowing from the mountain tops, cooling their naked arms and backs.

The endless, ribbed belt of the conveyer clanged and rumbled. The sunburnt, half-naked men hurriedly threw spadefuls of earth, pebbles and stone onto it. It was a great strain working at that speed. The workmen no longer felt the cooling breath of the mountains on their backs. The light blinded their eyes. The sunrays pierced the pure mountain air. The sun shone like a never-subsiding, steady blaze. The sullenly grey rocks looked dazzling white in the sun, like blinding steel brimming in a giant furnace. The men's naked backs turned oily and black.

For seventeen days now, from dawn till dark, Alimjan's team has been toiling here. But the famous spring has not rewarded them with a drop of water yet, nor has its fount been located. They had had to resort to blasting thrice. The explosions had thundered echoing through the valley, demolishing great rocks and clearing the way to the spring.

But there was no sight of the spring.

When they had cleared away the stones scattered by the blasts from the bottom of the gully, they came to a layer of pebbles. Water could be expected to appear at any moment now. But one day followed another, and it still remained hidden in the depths of the earth. The conveyer belt carried away tons of dry, grey pebbles.

The mountain of pebbles and rubble rose in a steep hill, stretching for dozens of metres, completely blocking from view the gully's granite wall. Somewhere in this wall was the crevice from which a mighty stream of water called the Kok-Bulak had gushed years ago. The task set before Alimjan and his team was to find the crevice, clear it out and release the water.

Everything hinged on finding the crevice. Even the oldest of the hunters who had spent their lives rambling through the mountains in search of game, could not tell exactly where it had been. The whole of the valley below the dynamited overhanging rock was now called the Kok-Bulak.

Tirelessly and patiently Alimjan questioned all the old people who remembered the spring; working on their stories and comparing notes he was gradually narrowing in on the spot where the spring must be concealed. For

seventeen days the team has been fighting their way through blasted rock.

For seventeen days they have been striving and there seemed no end to their strivings.

Their work was well organized, the team divided into three sections. The first broke the stones surviving the blast, too heavy for the conveyer belt. The second dug up the rubble, loosening the caked layers underneath. The third loaded the endless belt of the conveyer.

Bekbuta, working in the third section, dropped his mattock and wiped his sweating face with a handkerchief black with dirt. He was tired. To protect his shaven head from the sun he had tied his red belt kerchief round it. This gave his bright and energetic face an unnaturally malignant expression. After a moment's rest, Bekbuta began to speak addressing no one in particular. This was the first time anybody had spoken that morning.

"This conveyer's a damned good thing, you know," he said. "Can't help feeling respect for it. It does the work of ten men and never asks time off for a smoke. Is it really ten? Look, there are thirty of us and we're all gasping to keep time with it, it's one against thirty but it's got us sweating away our last. I say, Suvankul, d'you think it's got us sweating away our last?"

Suvankul merely jerked his head by way of an answer. He wielded his mattock faster; this conscientious man was trying to make up for Bekbuta's idle chatter.

"Are you well, Suvankul?" Bekbuta went on teasing. "Your tongue's not stuck to your teeth from exhaustion and heat, has it? Why don't you answer me?"

Once again, Suvankul refused to talk.

"No, it's not his tongue," one of the other men took up Bekbuta's joke. "It's something else. Our Suvankul-ata is so keen he won't even let his mouth go idle in the stress of work. He's got it curdling a litre of milk for his supper, that's what. That's why he can't talk."

That was too much for Suvankul, reserved though he was.

"Jabber, jabber," he snapped without letting go of his mattock. "Your tongue's longer than a cow's tail. Go on and jabber some more, perhaps the chairman will hear you and give you a workday unit for it."

The man retreated in the face of this counterattack and teased no more. But Bekbuta refused to give up.

"His tongue is long, that's true, but his mattock's not a short one either," he said. "And as for myself, though I do love a joke, I'm earning my workday units with my mattock and not my tongue. Leave it to me, friend, take a rest. It really looks as though your mouth were parched with weariness. You take a rest and I'll do both your work and mine."

"Look at him, the strong man," Suvankul grumbled. "To listen to him he'll move the mountain alone, and dig up the Kok-Bulak all by himself! Oh you, strong man! There we've been hanging about for two weeks now, and for all your loud speeches and strength we never came to see a drop of water yet."

Bekbuta was at a loss for an answer. Suvankul's taunt concerned not him alone. Alimjan, too, heard it and the man's mocking words were a knife-thrust into his very heart.

"Our failure has become common talk now," he thought. "On the other sites they make strides with every minute, and we've dug up tons of earth and rock and got nowhere."

Fury so vehement welled up in him that he saw red. With a mighty wrench he pried off a huge lump of earth and threw it towards the conveyer. Never, never would he give up. His goal was set and he'd win through whatever the cost. Neither his own doubts nor his friends' talk would shake him, they'd only make his strength increase tenfold.

Alimjan was sure that this was where the spring had been choked, they had to unearth it and his team would do it.

Mattocks, picks and crowbars showered blows on the wall of granite, sending sparks of chipped stone whistling through the air.

Snatches of thought flashed through Alimjan's mind. "Other teams report on new finds at every meeting, and what have I to report? Nothing but the amount of earth and rock removed. That means our work's poor. Couldn't have been worse. Everyone's beating us. We've got to put in more effort. We'll never live down the shame, never."

Alimjan got several letters. Kadyrov wrote to say that the excavator had been delivered and that Smirnov had appointed the best team to the dam-building site. Another team was to dig the canal. Kadyrov ended his letter on a whimpering note.

"It's hard on me now," he wrote. "Of all our reliable workers I'm the only one left to manage the place. All the men are either out with you or with Kerim digging

the canal. It's none of your worry—all you have to do is search for the Kok-Bulak—but I've been left to carry the brunt all alone here. New fields have to be stubbed and cleared.

"I wanted to start on that plot of ground to the right of the Hill of Slavery, but can one expect to get anywhere with our people? There's no one but old folks and infants left, that's why they got out of hand. They're set on clearing the fields along the main canal route. And what about ploughing? What about sowing?"

Kadyrov's whining made Alimjan grin spitefully.

"Our chairman's peaceful days are over," he thought. "Our people are set on cultivating more land. The old fogey will have to change step or he'll lag too far behind to catch up."

Another letter was from Pogodin, the foreman of the tractor brigade. It was a hastily written note telling Alimjan that a new tractor had been delivered to the kolkhoz.

"We can tackle the wildest of virgin land now, it'll be as soft as down when we're through with it," he wrote. "We'll grow fine cotton too. Only hurry and release the Kok-Bulak. Just give us water, plenty of water, we'll do our part!"

The news he got from the kolkhoz was good. But the thought depressed Alimjan: his friends were anxious to hear from him that the Kok-Bulak has come to life, and what had he to tell them?

His work absorbed him. All his life forces were concentrated in the strong, rhythmic sweeps of his mattock. But to look at him he did not seem exhausted at all. He

worked from dawn till dark with only a short break in the middle of the day for dinner. His stubborn energy and resilience drew on the whole team to leave far behind the daily quotas set for digging up this difficult stretch of ground.

The men working among the slabs of rock, scattered and broken by the blasts, neither sang, bandied jokes nor talked. The only sounds the granite walls of the gully heard were the rumbling of the conveyer and the clang of steel against stone. Silently, they fought their stubborn battle. They were storming a citadel standing between them and water. It was the seventeenth day of attack.

"How's everything, friends?" a voice called.

Alimjan leaned on his mattock, looked up, and saw Smirnov, his legs widely planted, standing high up on the precipice.

"It's the same thing today, nothing but rock and earth," Bekbuta was quick to answer. "But even a song has its ending, so there'll be an end to this too. To my way of thinking our Kok-Bulak will start gurgling and spluttering soon."

Alimjan, his head thrown back, was staring at Smirnov. The latter looked down into Alimjan's sunburnt face and saw anxiety and apprehension in his eyes.

Without another word Smirnov jumped down into the gully, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Oh my!" Suvankul gasped, stunned by the engineer's mad leap. "Why, it's no less than four metres down! You might have broken your neck."

Bekbuta measured his plump, phlegmatic friend with a scornful look.

"He's no match for you," he said. "He's an engineer who's seen things. A well-known man in canal digging. He's been in irrigation for twenty-five years. A front-line fighter too. That's his way of teaching the likes of you."

Highly pleased with his own quickness at repartee, Bekbuta spat in his hands and picked up his mattock again.

Smirnov took Alimjan, and the two men made a close investigation of the site. They found no signs pointing to the proximity of water. There was nothing but a solid grey wall, lined with folds and crevices, in parts piled high with rubble which had not been cleared away yet after the last blast.

When they had gone down the length of the excavation, they sat down on a flat stone which was as hot as the top of a stove. Smirnov drew out his tobacco pouch, rolled a cigarette and silently offered it to Alimjan. They lit up.

"I have never seen the Kok-Bulak in action, and I can't direct you to the spot where it had once been," Smirnov said quietly, watching the blue cigarette smoke melting in the air. "But, judging by all the data, it should be right there, see?" he pointed at the wall of rock hemming in the gully. "I've searched all over the place, I've scraped my knees raw. There's a hell of a lot of water there, but I can't see that the outlet's anywhere near. The other springs which we are digging up are lower down, they don't start from here. That's what I think. And another surmise of mine is that an underground pool is hidden behind this wall of rock, in the depths somewhere. And

the Kok-Bulak is the only spring that issues from it. That's what I think. Your problem is to find that stream."

"I know it is, but how am I to solve it?" Alimjan asked, barely moving his parched lips.

Smirnov gave him a sidelong look.

"If you don't find the Kok-Bulak we'll blow up the whole of this stronghold and try to force a release for the water. But it's something of a hazard. We may be in luck, and then again we may come a cropper. It would be better to manage without dynamiting, of course."

"Do you know what I think? When the Kok-Bulak was blown up, displacement of rock may have been so great that the water's exit was not only buried under but blocked for good."

Smirnov measured the wall again with his shrewd, experienced eye and shook his head.

"No," he said firmly, "a displacement like that could not have happened here. They would have had to blast the whole wall for that, but you can see for yourself that it's as good as new. It hasn't changed in hundreds of thousands of years. You're on the right track, though. The exit is here somewhere."

Alimjan felt heartened by Smirnov's words. The last sixteen days had been rather a strain on his nerves; he had smoked too much and there was a gnawing, sickly feeling in his chest.

"Well, why don't you tell me your news?" Alimjan asked warily. "How are things down below? How's the dam getting on?"

"It'll soon start going up. The basin's almost finished," Smirnov replied. "They're almost through with the canal

too. And Umurzak-ata and his old pals are busy stubbing the future irrigated fields. They've begun ploughing."

"And how's Kerim's Komsomol team doing?"

"Kerim's one of the best! And the Komsomols in his team are all eaglets to match. They did a fine job on the canal and on the Hill of Slavery too. That spot's been practically cleared, and as far as I can tell it won't be a disappointment."

Smirnov twitched an eyebrow and smiled.

"But this job is more interesting. It goes without saying that you've hundreds of difficulties. But then have you ever heard of true Soviet people looking for an easy life? I am quite certain that you will be rewarded with remarkable success for all your pains. You know, Alimjan, I never doubted it for a minute: you'll reclaim the Kok-Bulak, and soon too. I see this place will be cleared by tonight. I'll be back tomorrow morning and we'll give it a thorough inspection. The Kok-Bulak has no chance against you, no, not a chance, it's right here somewhere."

"Thank you, Ivan Nikitich, thank you for your kindness and encouragement," Alimjan said excitedly. "We, too, are certain that we'll win through. Let the other teams finish first, we'll sweat a bit longer here, but we shan't come back to our kolkhoz empty-handed." He called to his comrades: "What do you say, friends?"

"We think the same as you do! That's what we think too!" voices answered.

"Water will come running into the valley faster than any Akhaltekin stallion," Bekbuta said, gulping the words in his excitement, his tone both humorous and earnest. "Am I right? Yes, I am right. And when it starts gur-

gling down the ditches, our people will say: 'Attention! The victors of the Kok-Bulak are returning home!' "

"That's right. And now, friends, I wish you every success. I have to go now," Smirnov said getting up. He shook hands with all the men and started down the hill.

XI

By afternoon the rocks and rubble were cleared away. The ground offered less resistance to the mattock now. It was the usual grey soil with a considerable admixture of small, smooth pebbles. But there was still no sign of sand in the soil. This meant that the layer they had laid open was not the stream's natural bed but a deposit displaced by the basmaches' explosion.

When Alimjan had made certain that this was so, he reorganized the work of his team. He appointed seven men to load the conveyer, while the rest were each given a small area to dig, thus putting the whole of the cleared section under control.

Alimjan reckoned that working in this way one of the men was certain to hit upon at least some traces of the spring, such as fine, well-polished pebbles and white, clean-washed sand.

He chose an area in the very centre of the site. He dug up the soil with his mattock, Bekbuta shovelled it towards Suvankul who, working efficiently and unhurriedly, loaded it on to the conveyer belt.

Two hours later Alimjan stood knee-deep in the round

hole which was about a metre and a half across. He was doing much better than his comrades who had started digging together with him. Alimjan never slackened the pace of work he had adopted when he first started digging: his mattock swung as high and came down as rhythmically.

Suddenly the sound of the blows ceased. Bekbuta gave Alimjan a puzzled look.

With his mattock held high in a powerful sweep, Alimjan stood immobile. His eyes were staring. Now, slowly and gingerly, he put down his tool, thrust it aside, and kneeling down began to loosen the soil with his hands, carefully picking out some small, dark-brown, flat stones.

"What's that you've found?" Bekbuta cried and jumped down into the hole.

"A jug!" Alimjan muttered in a voice shaky with excitement. "A broken jug. Do you know what that means?"

"Sure," Bekbuta whispered getting excited too, and using both hands he began to loosen the soil as carefully as Alimjan was doing it, and picking out bits of the broken jug. "But, it may be...."

"No, it can't," Alimjan replied in a strangely calm tone. "Someone had left that jug beside the spring and it was buried under by the blast."

"Have ... have we found it?" Bekbuta asked in the same sibilant whisper, his eyes, alive with hope, fastened on Alimjan's face.

Suvankul hurried towards them and let out a yell: "We've found it! We've found it!"

Everyone came running and crowded around the hole.

Without waiting for their foreman's order they all fell eagerly upon the work, digging up the spot where Alimjan had found the jug. It was as if the men had drunk some spring water—a wonderful nectar increasing their energy tenfold towards the end of a hard working day.

A steady stream of loosened soil was hauled up by the conveyer.

At last the old bed of the spring was laid open—a caked layer of pebbles polished to a sheen by the water. There could be no doubt at all now: the goal of their long, selfless labour was in sight.

The Kok-Bulak was found—the famous spring stolen from the working people by the basmach bands!

The men worked in complete silence, all their moral and physical powers concentrated on the job they were mastering with dogged perseverance. The only sound to be heard was the laborious breathing of thirty strong men and the sound of their mattocks, picks and crowbars.

And now the last shovelfuls of earth were borne away by the conveyer. Suvankul carefully removed the remaining lumps of earth lying on top of the caked layer of pebble mixed with coarse grained sand. The bed of the spring was plainly revealed. The ancient road of a mountain stream, worn through and smoothed by thousands of millions of springs, led into the valley. The bed was dry. This did not surprise anyone at first. The Kok-Bulak. they all knew, used to gush straight from the rock wall and not from below, rising through a layer of pebble and sand. It followed, therefore, that the opening through which the water had once issued was to be looked for in the wall.

Alimjan and his comrades gazed up at the tall grey wall, cut with hollows, crevices and folds. Centuries of disposal to wind, sun, rain and cold left their mark, deeply lining this brow of stone. One of the crevices, a hardly discernible slit at the top, widened as it came down, gaping to about two feet wide just before it got to the bottom where, confronted with a harder layer, it stopped abruptly.

The crevice was crammed tight with earth and rubble which through years of pressure had become as hard a mass as natural rock.

The men inspected it in silence.

"I suppose that this is the Kok-Bulak," Suvankul broke the silence.

He coughed, startled by the sound of his own voice.

"Yes, it is the Kok-Bulak," said Alimjan.

He gripped a bright red stone sticking out of the colourful rubble cramming the crevice and gave it a hard pull. But the stone refused to budge.

"Bekbuta, hand me a pick."

With bated breath the men watched Alimjan clearing the crevice with mighty blows of the pick. A blow, and another. He was breaking down the last barrier. One more blow. But was it the final one? Would the Kok-Bulak, tearing free after years of captivity, start rippling, gurgling, uncoiling into an endless shining ribbon of water and, streaming down its old bed, gush into the gully and thence into the fields?

Alimjan with clenched teeth, his back tense, kept raining short, strong blows on the rock. With a dry crack a large wedge of caked rubble broke loose from the bottom

corner of the crevice and fell at his feet. Alimjan picked it up and brought it close to his eyes. To make doubly sure he felt the hole it had left with his hands.

"It's it! This is the Kok-Bulak!" he shouted at the top of his voice, and straightening up wiped his sweating face. "The floor of the crevice is as smooth as the palm of my hand. It's the water that has polished it so smooth."

Bekbuta, impatient to get on, pushed Alimjan aside gently but firmly, took his pick and carried on with the work.

Alimjan dropped down on a stone, completely spent. He could not have said what he was feeling then: perfect happiness or perfect exhaustion. The goal they were striving for was in sight.

"Why, it's getting dark already!" he exclaimed in surprise. "See how quickly the day went by! But there's still no water. What can be blocking its way? It would have knocked down this barrier long ago. The pressure of the water must be awfully strong here. So what could be wrong?"

Alimjan sat with his elbows propped on his knees, squinting his eyes and peering into the wall of stone. During the war he had peered in just the same way at the grey stone of the enemy's pill-boxes which his unit was to attack.

"Alimjan! Hey, Alimjan!" he heard someone shout from the working site down below.

"It's Mikhri," Alimjan recognized the kolkhoz secretary's voice. "What could he want?"

He got up and cupping his hands shouted back:

"Alimjan here. What's wrong?"

"Come down! It's a meeting, we're waiting for you." Mikhri's voice sounded much nearer now.

It was really time to knock off, the teams working below hill were probably eating their pilau by now.

"Time to knock off, comrades," Alimjan said to his team. "You've done a good piece of work today, you need a rest."

Alimjan picked up his shirt which he bad thrown off early that morning, and moved away.

XII

The night was far gone when Alimjan started up the path to the tent. It was a southern, black night; great stars shone in the sky shedding a steady light. Those who live in the lowlands never see stars like these: their brilliance is dimmed in the fine dust and vapours down below.

From above Alimjan looked down on the hotly blazing fires in the valley. He could see the glow of the flames wavering on the ground, and the shapes of men busy around the fires. Higher up the rise the fires seemed closer to one another, herding together as though ready for a take-off. While in the distance they merged into one flaming thread, running on and on until it was snipped off where the gully made a sharp turn towards the Kok-Bulak.

Alimjan got to the top of the hill. The space in front of the tent was crowded. A small, slim-legged table had

been brought out and set under the only lamp, while everything else was swallowed up in darkness.

The three people presiding at the meeting were Jurabayev, Aikiz and Smirnov. Jurabayev and Aikiz were carrying on a lively conversation while Smirnov, though listening to them, peered hard into the darkness, beyond the beam of the light, as though waiting for someone.

"Could they be waiting for me?" Alimjan thought. "It's rather awkward then."

He hated to keep anyone waiting. Angry with himself he hurried his step and quickly sat down with a group of men a good distance away from the circle of light.

The others knew him at once in the darkness and started bombarding him with questions and jokes:

"Well, tell us, how's your Kok-Bulak doing?"

"Have you broken the spell cast over the water yet?"

A tall, slender youth, wearing a smart silk striped robe and a beautifully embroidered skull-cap pushed far back on his head, shouted:

"Hey, Alimjan-aka! You should listen harder. Press your ear down to the ground and listen. When you catch a gurgling and a rippling, that's where you should dig."

"I think it's the October Kolkhoz secretary," Alimjan thought, straining to make out the young man's face in the shadows and trying to think of something cutting and funny in reply.

Just then one of the group suddenly stood up in Alimjan's defence.

"Alimjan-aka doesn't drink, everyone knows that," he said, "so he's not so familiar with anything that gurgles. It's up your street, Babajan, you should have been sent

to find the Kok-Bulak. You've got a good ear for anything that gurgles."

Everyone burst out laughing. It was well said. Right between the eyes. Here and there people clapped.

Babajan, who had teased so unfortunately, lost countenance and slipped away into the gloom. Forgetting all about his new silk robe, he flopped down on the ground behind another group of men only to escape the taunts aimed at him.

When Jurabayev heard this sudden burst of laughter he broke off his conversation with Aikiz and looked up, curious to see what was the joke.

Smirnov stood up.

"Let us begin, comrades," he said. "There's no one else we need wait for. Whoever has to be present at the meeting is here. I repeat," he said in answer to Aikiz's look, "everyone is here. To start with, Comrade Jurabayev, secretary of the District Party Committee, will take the floor."

"Dear friends," Jurabayev said. "I have come here today to bring you glad and exciting tidings. A short while ago we approached the Government with the request to help us develop the Altyn-Sai lands. Our request was a very modest one. We had failed to appreciate the scope and significance of the undertaking we were planning, and our mistake was pointed out to us. The Government has passed a resolution which states that our undertaking is the first step made by the Soviet people in its advance upon the Kyzyl-Kum, the first stage in resettling the dwellers of the barren, rocky mountains in the fertile submontane regions. We have been allocated

great sums of money and machinery in order to complete construction speedily and successfully. The Government's resolution has by far exceeded our most daring hopes. I shall now read the document to you."

Jurabayev opened his briefcase, took out the document and read it aloud from beginning to end.

No one uttered a sound, anxious not to miss a word of what Jurabayev was saying.

Suddenly, a girl's thin voice, both timid and joyful, rang in the silence.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!"

There was a thunder of applause. The men jumped to their feet and hugged one another. No one could make out a word in the noise that broke out. And now jubilant cries were heard above the happy hubbub of voices:

"Long live our Party! Long live our Government!"

The first passionate reaction to the good news began to subside. Gradually every one settled down again. But no matter how hard Smirnov and Aikiz tried, they could not restore complete silence or bring the meeting back to its business-like level.

When comparative silence was resumed, Jurabayev gave a more detailed account of the Government's resolution.

Completion dates were set for every section separately: excavation of springs, dam building and canal digging. The volume of the reservoir as well as the power of the prospective electric station were established. The concluding clauses of the resolution stated the area of the land to be put under irrigation, the terms of building up a new kolkhoz village, and gave comprehensive directions for

resettling the mountain-dwellers in the newly irrigated lands. All the Altyn-Sai kolkhozes were classified among the republic's cotton-planting kolkhozes.

An awed silence fell upon the listeners when Jurabayev came to the end of his speech. All that they had talked about at work, at meetings and during their hours of leisure, had shaped itself into a resolution, was actually being put into practice, had become a decree to be carried out within specified terms, in order that a reservoir behind the dam might reflect the sun like a huge mirror, a sea of cotton flood the fields, and a power station rise high above the water sending energy along its wires to operate machines and give light and warmth to the people in their homes.

"My friends," Jurabayev said when the applause had subsided. "Our people have a saying, *khom-khayol*, which means a raw dream. In the past, the dearest hopes of our people remained nothing but raw dreams. They could never come true because one cannot build a lasting thing out of raw material. But today, the dreams of our people are no longer raw, they have become mature and tempered. Our Government lends an attentive ear to the wishes of the people. We can even go further: in Soviet land the dreams of the people have taken on the power of immutable laws and are being systematically put into practice. . . .

"For many centuries the sands of the Kyzyl-Kum had been moving in on the fields tilled by man, but the Soviet people told the sands: Stop! and they stopped. More than that, the Soviet people began to press the enemy

back, and the ominous Kyzyl-Kum is retreating before them.

"This brief document," Jurabayev held the paper high above his head, "opens up a vista of grandeur never known before.

"My friends, we are on the eve of the first cotton planting in Altyn-Sai."

Now the chairmen of the kolkhozes, the team foremen, unit leaders and ordinary workmen all came up to the presidium table in turn to speak their mind about the volume of work remaining and the shortest possible terms of completion. The consensus of opinion was that four days should cover it.

The chairman of the October Kolkhoz kept tugging at his straggling reddish beard, and after long consideration declared that he had the most difficult section to work and four days would hardly suffice.

"The soil I have, you know yourselves, is just solid rock," he whined in a plaintive croak, while he darted quick, sly glances at the other members of the conference. "Take Kerim, now, the soil he's got is softer than butter, that's a different story of course. . . ."

But he was not given a chance to finish. The crafty old man was silenced with shouts of indignant protest.

"Look at him humbling himself when he's dug up whole mountains already," some taunted.

"I'd like to see you and all your kolkhoz digging up the Kok-Bulak! That would make you squirm! Alimjan's had nothing but solid rock to tackle since the very first day," others cried angrily.

"Oh no, comrades, he's just playing a cunning game. He's all tearful now, but tomorrow he'll strut up and report: I've completed my job! He's a sly fox, that one."

The "sly fox" went on whining and complaining, but finally agreed that four days was more than enough of course, and he was hoping to be able to report on the completion of his job in three.

"That's more like it, that's the way," voices rumbled. "And now let's hear what the Komsomols have to say. Where's the Komsomol team foreman? Why does he keep mum? Come on, speak up."

Kerim, foreman of the Komsomol team, had no intention of keeping mum at all. Smiling good-naturedly, he walked up to the table. His teeth, as white as foam, flashed in his face when he spoke.

"We have a lot of work on our canal," he said. "If we go on in the ordinary way, we'll be hanging about for another seven or eight days. But after hearing what comrade Jurabayev had to say, we put our heads together and this is what we have decided: we shall muster all our forces and complete the canal in three days instead of seven. And it will be a high-quality job too."

His voice dropped a key and lost some of its firmness.

"Besides, I've been authorized by the Komsomols to challenge the Kok-Bulak team. On behalf of my team I challenge the foreman of their team to complete the whole job in three days." He searched for Alimjan with his eyes and added: "Of course if Alimjan agrees."

"I do," Alimjan replied.

The meeting did not break up till late at night. Jurabayev went back to town. Everyone left, except Smirnov, Aikiz and Alimjan who were still talking about what was foremost in their hearts—the Kok-Bulak.

"My team will never give it up," Alimjan said stubbornly. "No matter what, we'll force it to yield up the water."

He looked trustingly at his friends seeking their support, but he was sorely disappointed.

"And who's going to do the sowing?" Aikiz asked harshly.

Alimjan gave an embarrassed shrug.

"Sowing, why.... Just at first they'll manage without us somehow. Kadyrov..."

Aikiz cut in on an even harsher note.

"Is Kadyrov going to do the sowing? You don't seem to know our Kadyrov judging by the way you talk, Alimjan-aka. Trusting Kadyrov with an undertaking as important as the first planting of cotton would be dooming it to failure."

"I've no confidence in him either, Aikiz," Alimjan said. "He's one of those people whose milk won't turn sour even on a hot day. We started this construction against his will and he resents our success. And once he's in that mood he'll ignore the others entirely and do just as he pleases. But what is the fuss about now? We'll just put Kadyrov in charge of the sowing campaign for three or four days, no longer."

"Still, the planting of cotton is a new thing to us," Aikiz persisted. "Whatever you say, Alimjan-aka, you must definitely come back to the kolkhoz in three days."

"But how can I come back without the Kok-Bulak water?" Alimjan said bitterly. "You know we haven't found a drop of water yet."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Smirnov broke in. He had all this time been silently searching for something in his field case. "Who told you there's no water in the Kok-Bulak?"

"No one. I can see it for myself," Alimjan answered sullenly. "There is water of course, we're doing absolutely all we can to fight our way to it, but I'm far from certain that we'll do it within three days."

"We will," Smirnov declared resolutely. "We've got three days' grace.... Here it is," he cried, holding up a piece of paper he had been looking for. As he talked he jotted something down on it. "As I was saying, we've got three days to go. And three days to those who have skill and zeal means quite a lot. During the war our army used to take fortified towns after a three days' storming. So mind you don't lose heart." Smirnov snapped his field case shut and slung it over his shoulder. "If we don't get to the water in three days' time, we'll force our way to it with the help of some ammonal, that's something no mountain can withstand, if it comes to that. I'll come over early tomorrow. We'll tackle it together. There will be water, and soon, too. Well, good-night."

Smirnov started towards the descent into the valley with resolute strides. Aikiz and Alimjan walked away from the table, as though by prearrangement, and sat down on a bench close to the precipice.

"Did I hurt you?" Aikiz asked gently. "Do you think, perhaps, that I'm wrong?"

"No," Alimjan said almost humbly. "You are right, my beloved. My thinking was wrong."

"Do you mean it, Alimjan-aka? You're no less responsible for the cotton planting than Kadyrov. You are responsible to the Party. And so your place is in the kolkhoz."

"You're right, Aikiz, quite right. I give you my word of honour: the water of the Kok-Bulak will come to the kolkhoz before I do. We shall make it so."

Their shoulders touched. Aikiz did not move away.

"You sound so confident," she said with emotion.

"I have as much confidence in my team as I have in myself," Alimjan said. And then, as though plunging into the abyss at his feet, he added: "But I don't have all that confidence in my beloved. It's harder to get her to say 'yes' than to get the Kok-Bulak to release the water. And it's such a very short word too."

Aikiz caught his hand and pressed her face into the palm. She sat hushed, listening to the voice of happiness which was there beside her, speaking to her. It told her that life was wonderful, that skies were clear, and that the road the two of them would travel together was straight and free. She sat listening to the voice of happiness, but minutes fled and it was time to go.

"Will it be soon?" Alimjan asked.

"Soon, my beloved. That very short word 'yes' won't take longer than two weeks to follow the Kok-Bulak water. . . ."

XIII

That evening, Aikiz, assistant director of the project, endorsed the following order: tomorrow at noon the foundation stones of the dam were to be laid.

The bed of the Altyn-Sai River was a deep, narrow gully. There was something sinister in its savage beauty. It was always sunk in gloom. Only the rays of the noonday sun penetrated its depths, lighting with an eerie glow the slate-black, as though charred, walls, stained with dark red blotches that looked like congealed blood.

The Altyn-Sai, an unruly mountain stream, came rushing down this narrow gully.

It was a desolate and wild spot. The noise of the roaring water frightened the birds away. But lower down, too, where the Altyn-Sai tore out of the gully, its rocky banks were deserted and lifeless. Even in spring they were denied the soft carpeting of grass. The banks lay stark and dead, parched in the glaring sun, and all living things shrank from them, all but men.

Men came to prospect it, they took samples of rock, measured the depth of the river and the speed of its current. They made a survey of the locality. After them came hundreds of workmen. The narrow gully resounded with the clamour of an excavator. Men were preparing the bed of the dam. Rocks were blown up with a thundering blast. Men were fighting nature. They sang as they worked.

The river, striking this unexpected obstacle in its path, swirled and darted about furiously, flinging high its foaming tails. The water dashed itself against the barrier,

fighting for a way out. And men made an outlet for it. Relieved, the Altyn-Sai tore madly through it.

A fleet of carts and lorries delivered blasted and broken stone from the pits and gravel from the nearest quarries, dumping it in growing mountains on the banks of the gully. Later, when the basin had been sunk, all that stone and gravel would line the bottom of it, and then the dam would rise high, for ever subjugating the Altyn-Sai to the will of man.

That day Aikiz got up at sunrise. The rosy light of dawn caressed the grass in the courtyard and glowed in Baichibar's eyes. His very hoofs seemed bathed in a pink glow.

When she got to the village Soviet she rang up Jurabayev. In a clear and confident voice she reported that the basin was ready, and informed him of the hour set for laying the foundation stones. Jurabayev offered her his congratulations, but at the same time disappointed her by saying that he could not be present.

"Perhaps we could postpone it till tomorrow? Could you be there tomorrow, Comrade Jurabayev?"

"But why postpone it?" Jurabayev's voice lost some of its warmth. "If everything's ready what's the sense of putting it off? Under the circumstances postponement would be a crime. Begin without me. And, Aikiz, I'd advise a little less jubilance and a little more responsibility for the job in hand. We'll celebrate afterwards, when we've completed the dam."

Aikiz, burning with shame, quickly put down the receiver.

On her way back to the construction site Aikiz went

over in her mind all the operations that were to precede the laying of the foundation. Smirnov had not been to the site for three days, spending all his time at the other sections, anxious to complete the digging of the canal and clearing of the springs as soon as possible.

Aikiz never doubted that she was following Smirnov's instructions and drawings to the letter, directing the operations in his behalf. All she had to do was close her eyes and there were the blueprints before her. She knew every line on them by heart.

"Everything's in order," she was thinking, checking herself again and again, "we can begin. Smirnov is sure to arrive before we start."

She remembered it well: in Smirnov's drawings the pits in the gully's walls were in perfect alignment with the dam. She also remembered him explaining his plan to her.

"The ends of the dam will be wedged in these pits," he had said, "and the stone removed from them will be used for building the dam."

Smirnov's idea had appealed to Aikiz. She interpreted his plan of obtaining material right on the spot as proof of his concern for the workmen, his anxiety to spare them the necessity of bringing stone from the quarries. The workmen, though, in their unmatched efficiency and zeal had delivered such quantities of stone and gravel to the building site within a mere fortnight, that the plan of pitting the gully walls became redundant.

Let the walls remain intact. The dam would abut against them at each end. The granite walls were more reliable than broken stone and gravel with which they

would have had to fill in the gaps. And besides it was saving them a lot of time. It would have taken four, or even five days to hollow out the walls. And time was running short. They ought to start planting the cotton.

Baichibar stepped lightly, alert to his mistress' guiding hand. He hated trotting, he liked to gallop. But Aikiz would not let him go.

"These lands are languishing their last in their primordial idleness," she was thinking as she gazed about her. "Next spring this shrubbery too will give way to tilled fields."

"Isn't Smirnov smart," her thoughts ran on. "He grasped the whole situation right away. It took daring to decide to turn the waters of the Altyn-Sai at a right angle. A daring plan. And our people have daring too. No sooner had he voiced his idea than they set to. Very soon now the dam will come up level with the banks of the gully."

According to plan, the dam was to be built just where the irrigation canal met the gully which, though very deep, was far above the level of the submontane regions into which the water was to flow.

Smirnov had calculated correctly on this point too. Though the water was twenty-five metres below, the rise it was to be given was considerably less.

Happiness, confidence and the infinite joy of life overwhelmed Aikiz so strongly that, bending low in her saddle, she gave a crazy, boyish whoop and whipped Baichibar to a gallop.

The wind whistled in her ears. Baichibar flew along, streaking low over the ground. The whistling wind was

mingled with the clang of machinery and tools coming from the gully.

Swerving abruptly from road rolled smooth by countless wheels, Aikiz gave Baichibar full rein and flew up to the top of the hillock. On the other side was a sheer drop of about ten metres or so, continuing in the gully's granite wall.

Reining Baichibar in, Aikiz looked down. There, at her feet, lay the future bed of the reservoir. Aikiz jumped down to the ground and bent low over the precipice. The excavator had already left the site. A group of workmen were sitting on the edge of the basin listening, as far as she could guess, to what the two men standing close to the gully wall were talking about.

One of them, Aikiz saw, was Jalalov, the construction superintendent, and the other was the October Kolkhoz team foreman. Jalalov was a short, stocky man, dressed in a green jerkin. The skull-cap, pushed far back, revealed his tall, square forehead and the beginning of the bald spot on his head. Jalalov seemed to be listening intently to what the other was saying, nodding his head in agreement from time to time.

Having made sure the work in the basin was finished, Aikiz turned to look in the direction of the quarries. She saw a stream of carts and lorries loaded high with gravel coming down the road. But it was difficult to see what was going on in the quarries themselves from this distance. She leapt back into her saddle and started down the hill, thinking she would go to the gravel quarry first and then on to the stone pits.

She glanced at her wrist-watch: there was plenty of time, it was only ten.

Jalalov, sighting Aikiz on top of the hill, called to her and waved his arms, but she did not hear him and rode away. He hurried down the gully and up the sheer side to the road above.

Aikiz did not stay long in the gravel quarry, she saw that everything was in order; work was going on at a good, fast pace. An uninterrupted stream of heavily loaded carts and lorries drove away from the quarry to meet as steady a stream of empty vehicles.

She next rode to the stone pits. People were working as hard here but the stream of lorries and carts was moving much slower, for stone was a different proposition to gravel, after all.

The place had been charged with dynamite the night before. At dawn that day, hundreds of minor blasts went up simultaneously in a mighty, shattering explosion, reverberating far and wide. And now the rocks and boulders, smashed by the explosion into bits and pieces, lay on the ground, their jagged edges glistening in the sun as though sprinkled with salt.

Aikiz saw two young boys trying to lift a huge stone into a lorry, but it was evidently too much for them. Aikiz jumped down to give the youngsters a good scolding for attempting a job beyond their strength, when she suddenly saw Kadyrov. He was standing there, hands in pockets, watching the boys struggling with the stone, a leer on his face. The chairman was as smug and smart as ever.

"Good-morning, Comrade Kadyrov," Aikiz called to him pleasantly. "Still admiring the work of others? Let's give them a helping hand instead, shall we?" And she hurried away to help the boys.

"I had a hard time finding you, Comrade Umurzakova," someone panted out behind her.

Aikiz turned round quickly and saw Jalalov, flushed and breathless with exertion.

"I wasn't there last night, but this morning I was told that you had given the order to start laying the dam at noon. Surely that can't be true?"

"It is true, why?"

"But what about the plan, Comrade Umurzakova? According to the plan we have to pit the walls of the gully."

"There's no need for that at all now. We've got material to spare without that. There's no sense in wasting time and energy."

Jalalov looked amazed.

"But, Comrade Umurzakova, don't you see that the purpose of pitting the walls is not to get more material but to give better support to the dam! Those pits have to be made on a level with the basin. Or else—surely you must see it, Comrade Umurzakova—anything might happen! When we get the water level right to the top of the gully, we may discover that the walls hold layers permeable to water. What will happen then? Under pressure, the water will soon find a loop-hole, and in a few months the dam will be washed away and destroyed ... there'll be disaster!"

Aikiz listened half-turning away from Jalalov, her

shoulders hunched. She was weighing up the man's words with poignant anxiety.

Then she burst out laughing—spontaneously and merrily, the way she laughed in the happiest moments of her life. Running up to a slab of granite, she struck it hard with her fist. Her hand was bruised and red. She pressed it to her lips, but her eyes were still brimming with laughter.

"Do you really believe the dam will stand more resistance than natural granite rock? Do you really believe that the water won't find a loop-hole in the dam but it will in natural rock? That it will wash the rock away? Oh, you're really talking nonsense, Comrade Jalalov!"

She looked about her merrily and suddenly noticed that the workmen were drawn into a tight circle about them. "So they've been listening to our argument," she thought. Aikiz stood up on a stone and spoke to them.

"Why have you stopped working, comrades? We'll start laying the foundation of the dam in exactly forty minutes from now."

Aikiz never wasted words. Umurzak-ata used to say that his daughter was not one to let her speech run ahead of thought. She never doubted for a moment that the men would instantly go back to their jobs. But, strangely, they remained where they were. Aikiz realized that they were siding with Jalalov and not her.

She felt as though a bucket of icy water were dashed over her feverish body. She jumped down from the stone, at a loss what to do next.

A large, sweaty hand fell on her shoulder. Aikiz swerved

abruptly. It was Kadyrov. His usually sullen face was alight with a well-meaning smile, and only in the very depths of his narrowed eyes there lurked something evil.

Kadyrov was obviously relishing the quarrel.

"My advice to you," he said insinuatingly, "comrade superviser of this section and assistant director of the project, is to think it over and cancel your order. I should also advise you to take no hasty new decisions that go contrary to plan. Of course, I'm no great specialist in irrigation, but neither are you incidentally...." Kadyrov screwed up his eyes to mere slits. "I do believe though that in this argument of yours Jalalov is in the right and not you. You were a bit too rash, dear comrade.... It's not surprising of course: when one is young and inexperienced one is impatient to do things the hasty and the new way. But we shan't condemn you. Who of us is faultless? I, too, carry pocketsful of mistakes."

The tone in which he spoke to her in front of all those people lashed at Aikiz's pride. She almost choked with the insult of it.

She pushed Kadyrov's hand away roughly and turned to face Jalalov. She did not say anything for a full minute. Aikiz seemed to have mastered her pride and was now carefully weighing up the words of her opponents. But this was not so. Aikiz had no misgivings, she was certain she was right. She was simply giving her anger a minute to cool down. She did not want to let the men see how deeply Kadyrov's attitude had wounded her, she did not want the men to see her lose her poise.

The minute was over and now Aikiz looked calmly into Jalalov's face. Her voice sounded crisp and firm.

"Comrade Jalalov, before issuing my order I sized it up thoroughly. This morning, I had a talk with the secretary of the District Party Committee. He told me that if the basin was ready we had no right to tarry for a single hour. In my capacity of superviser of this section and assistant director of the project, I request you, Comrade Jalalov, to proceed," Aikiz looked at her wrist-watch, "in twenty-five minutes from now. That is all I have to say to you. Kindly carry out my orders."

Jalalov shrugged, baffled and indignant. He turned round and started slowly towards the gully. He walked a few paces and paused, looking back at Aikiz. She read something not unlike fatherly compassion in his eyes.

"Have it your own way," he said without malice. "We shall begin in twenty-five minutes from now. But this is a serious business. I'll send for Comrade Smirnov. He'd better be there, just in case."

"I'll gladly do it for you, Comrade Jalalov," Kadyrov offered courteously. "I've got my car here. I'll go and see Comrade Smirnov personally and explain it all to him. No trouble at all...."

This touched Aikiz on the raw.

"You're too hasty, Comrade Kadyrov," she cried in a high, distressed voice, holding back her tears with a supreme effort. "You'll never manage the gullies in your car, and you couldn't ride a horse, you'd crumple your suit. I'll go and look for Comrade Smirnov myself! Baichibar, come here!"

She leapt into the saddle and galloped away.

"Get started in twenty-five minutes from now!" Aikiz shouted as she streaked past Jalalov. "A little less jubilance and a little more responsibility. We'll do the celebrating afterwards!"

She got to where the Yangok-Sai issued from the mountain, but the workmen there told her that Smirnov had gone early that day to the Kok-Bulak site to see Alimjan. Aikiz started up the gully and soon saw Smirnov walking down towards her.

"Good-day to you, Aikiz," he called. "I'm on my way to see you. How are you getting on? Is the basin all ready?"

Aikiz dismounted, threw the bridle over the pommel, and left Baichibar to nibble the grass in the path. She and Smirnov sat down on a boulder. His face was grey with dust—dust lay on his eyebrows and on the mole on his chin.

Aikiz gave vent to all her bitterness, the rankling hurt to her pride, and her anger with Kadyrov. She talked hurriedly, not so much to seek his support as to pour out her wrongs and relieve her soul of all the anger and indignation burdening it.

When she was telling him of her quarrel with Jalalov, Smirnov gave her a queer, sidelong look. His dusty eyebrows crawled upwards, then came down again. Aikiz stopped short.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Smirnov asked through clenched teeth. "Foundation, did you say? Why foundation? Are they through with the excavation?"

"Yes," Aikiz answered, "they are." She was puzzled and confused.

"And have they pitted the walls of the gully?"

"No. But we've got material to spare as it is, Ivan Nikitich. The walls of the gully are most reliable. They're stronger than the dam we're building. There can be no question of washing away."

"And you've started laying the foundation?" Smirnov shrieked in a high falsetto. "I'm asking you, have they started? Speak up! I'm asking you."

"We have," Aikiz mumbled inaudibly.

But Smirnov went on shrieking in his high falsetto, which was so unexpected it terrified her.

"In that case I have the honour of telling you that within a month the water will wash the dam away, stone by stone. It'll destroy it to hell! I have the honour of telling you this. Oh you, builders! Infants and greenhorns, but you've more arrogance than.... Why didn't you report to me? Oh, you!"

Smirnov snatched the crop away from Aikiz, ran towards Baichibar and, without touching the stirrups, leapt into the saddle.

Baichibar balked and reared. Smirnov calmed him with a firm hand, struck hard with his crop, and galloped madly down the gully amid a clatter of stones flying from the hoofs.

XIV

Aikiz stared down the road without seeing a thing. Nothing at all—neither the dust settling slowly on the rocky path, nor Smirnov's back in the clouds of this dust.

Tears gushed from her eyes. Aikiz wept bitterly and

hopelessly. She wept because Smirnov had promoted her to the post of section superviser and she had bungled her job. She wept because she had failed to carry out the plan he had elaborated so wisely and well. She wept remembering that no one in the whole district had wanted to take Kadyrov's warning into account when, on learning that she was appointed assistant director of the project, he had foamed at the mouth raging and arguing that she was too young and inexperienced. She cried over the untimely end of her career, her joyful life, sincerely believing that all her active existence was over. She wept because she believed she had deceived and failed the workers, the District Party Committee, Jurabayev and Alimjan.

The thought of Alimjan made her long for him with all her being, her heart, her mind, and all her grief-laden soul. Who if not Alimjan would understand? Who if not he, her beloved, would console her?

"I must go to him! There's no one but him. I'll tell him everything. I didn't mean it.... I didn't mean it.... I only wanted to do what was best.... Let him judge, let him drive me away, but he'll understand. He alone will understand."

She did not walk, she ran. The heels of her boots turned and slipped on the stones. She was running towards the Kok-Bulak. To Alimjan, only Alimjan....

Suddenly she stopped.

She couldn't go to Alimjan. He had his own worries and responsibilities. He had promised to reclaim the Kok-Bulak, he had to do it whatever the cost. He was leading his men in attack.... Had she the right to go to him?

What would she bring him? Nothing but tears, complaints and an admission of failure. He was fighting a hard battle, and was this her way of giving him heart? She would come to him tearfully and say: "If you love me, Alimjan, help me, protect and comfort me." Was that what she would say to him? Why, Aikiz, where is your pride, your dignity and your love? Is that your idea of love—just leaning upon the one you love and never helping him, giving him heart in battle?

Aikiz felt exhausted with all these thoughts, tired and weak. She stood in the middle of the path and said to herself: "I must go to the village Soviet, ring up the District Party Committee and report my terrible mistake to Comrade Jurabayev calmly and without sparing myself. Let the Communists judge me."

Aikiz saw no light to pierce the gloom. She was close to the village when her ear caught the fast and rhythmic clatter of horses' hoofs. Aikiz walked on without turning round. The clatter grew nearer, and now she looked up.

It was Smirnov and Jalalov, the latter riding a strange horse and leading Baichibar by the bridle. The faces of the riders were dark with dust, but Aikiz took it for moroseness.

She stepped to the side of the road to let them pass. She thought they were on their way to the District Party Committee to report on her mistake. Her heart cringed. It was not herself, it was her father she was thinking of. His daughter's ill-fame would cast a shadow on the old man too.

Strangely, when the riders came abreast of Aikiz, they reined in their horses, and dismounted. Smirnov was panting for breath, and the two men instantly flopped down on the grass in the shade of a tree.

Aikiz remained hesitantly on the side of the road.

"Why don't you join us, Aikiz?" Smirnov called to her. "Come here and sit down."

He drew a pouch from his pocket and rolled a cigarette, a finger thick. Jalalov followed his example and rolled one the same size for himself.

Aikiz walked up to them, but she did not sit down, she stood behind Smirnov hugging the tree and pressing her cheek to the rough bark. Several minutes went by in silence. Smirnov and Jalalov greedily inhaled the smoke of their cigarettes.

"It's as hot as an oven," Smirnov said.

"The work's hot, the sun's hot, and the people are hot too, that's why it's baking so, I reckon," Jalalov came back.

They smoked for a while in silence.

"Why so silent, Aikiz? Where are you anyway?" Smirnov did not feel like getting up, he twisted his neck this way and that but could not catch the girl's face. "Are you going through a psychological tragedy? Or is it already cooling off?"

"It isn't," Aikiz whispered. "And it never will. I... I almost wrecked the dam. People are taken to court for that...." She burst out crying, clutching the tree tighter. She wept as hopelessly and bitterly as before.

Smirnov quickly got to his feet and walked up to her.

Jalalov was tactful enough to go and busy himself with the horses, straightening a perfectly straight saddle.

Smirnov placed his hand on the girl's shoulder and spoke in a voice unsteady with emotion.

"You are a wonderful girl, Aikiz. It's the honest truth. I'm not used to saying such things, but you've forced me to. Yes, you have made a mistake, a grave mistake...."

"And my mistake..."

"Yes, it's a grave mistake, I've said so already. I'm not comforting you, I'm just trying to help you to understand the thing in all honesty. One should see one's mistakes before it's too late and conscientiously correct them. It's bad of you to have thought so poorly of Jalalov and me, of all your friends you have been working with for so many years in such close contact. Surely, we would never have allowed your inadvertent mistake to lead to disaster. Remember you have many true and loyal friends, Aikiz. Any one of them would gladly help you in a difficult moment. But they won't allow you to shed tears for it's a pastime as unpleasant as it is useless. Jalalov and I have nipped your mistake in the bud, so to say. The pits will be hollowed out by tomorrow in plenty of time. Everything is in order. The men on the site have long been waiting to see you back."

Aikiz stared in bewilderment at Smirnov and then at Jalalov. He stood slapping Baichibar's saddle, inviting her to mount.

Slowly, very slowly Aikiz was recovering her balance.

"This is my order," Smirnov said with business-like sternness to check a new flood of her tears, "tomorrow at

noon you are to start building the body of the dam. Is that clear? On completion of the work we shall hold a gala opening and you, comrades Umurzakova and Jalalov, should better start planning the celebrations. On your horse, Aikiz!"

XV

Alimjan got back to his tent in the dead of night. There was not a light anywhere. The worn out men slept in their hastily put up tents. Alimjan did not bother to undress, he merely kicked the boots off his weary feet and fell on his cot. He put his arms under his head. "Sleep, sleep," every muscle in his body clamoured.

But sleep would not come.

The long days of struggle! His team was made up of the kolkhoz's best men. The Kok-Bulak was found but it would not yield a drop of water. Alimjan had given the word of a Communist to find an outlet for the water within the three remaining days.

Suddenly Alimjan sat up, as though he had received a jolt. He groped about his bed feverishly. Where were his boots? Where the hell did they go? His hand butted into the wall of reeds and the whole tent shook. It was a hell of a tent!

A moment later Alimjan was feeling his way towards Smirnov's tent in the pitch darkness of the gully.

A dim light was burning inside. A turned down paraffin lamp was flickering on a small table. In the far corner Smirnov lay snoring on a heap of hay covered with a trench coat.

"Ivan Nikitich," Alimjan called softly. "Wake up, dear friend. I need you desperately, Ivan."

The snoring ceased abruptly. Smirnov opened his sleep-bloated eyes with an effort. He lay staring at the man who had disturbed him in the middle of the night. The man stood with his back to the light and, startled awake, Smirnov did not recognize him right away.

With a habitual gesture he thrust his hand under his pillow, found his glasses and put them on. "Oho, it's you, is it," he said, and sat up.

"What's wrong? Anything happened?" he asked, wide awake now.

"No, friend. Nothing's happened. But if we don't look out something will."

"It will?"

"Yes."

"Disaster?"

"Something like it."

"You're lying there," Smirnov said calmly and stretched his aching limbs.

He took such a mighty stretch that Alimjan was afraid the man's muscles might snap.

"Tell me clearly and sensibly why wouldn't you let me sleep. Has the Kok-Bulak escaped? You've only just found it and it's given you the slip already! You should have chained it down, my dear."

"No, the Kok-Bulak hasn't fled. The trouble is there's no water yet. It's a perfectly dry spring. The whole crevice is crammed tight with rubble."

"So you come to my tent in the middle of the night and expect me to clear it for you right here, eh?" Smir-

nov said with a laugh. "You've achieved the main thing—you've found the spring's exit. If you don't manage to clear the way for it we'll use some explosives. They'll play such havoc with the exit it'll be big enough for elephants to stampede through."

"Ivan, my dear friend, do come along and take a look," Alimjan pleaded. "The rock there is most unreliable with all those cracks. In my opinion a blast would do more harm than good. We'll block the exit for ever. The crevice must be cleared by hand. Do come with me now Let's take another look. You know I've only got two more days to go. What will our people say if the Kok-Bulak really proves to be a waterless spring?"

Smirnov had not had a proper sleep for three nights. He pictured himself pulling on his boots, trudging down the cold, dark gully for more than a kilometre.... He felt irresistibly drawn to the heap of hay covered with his trench coat.... After all, was that asking too much?

He shook himself like a wet goose and pulled on his shabby canvas boots.

It was one of those darkest of nights. The black silhouettes of the mountains—blacker than the sky itself—were vaguely etched against the sombre sky. A raw piercing wind blew from the upper reaches of the gully. It felt as though the doors of a vast cellar, stocked high with melting blocks of ice, were flung open there.

Alimjan led the way, lighting the road with the lamp he had taken from Smirnov's tent. Smirnov, fighting back his overwhelming drowsiness, trudged heavily behind. Wild, disjointed snatches of dreams flashed through his sleep-laden mind.

They walked all the way to the Kok-Bulak in complete silence.

There were the workmen's tents now. Alimjan was about to call someone but thought better of it, for the worn out men were sleeping the sleep of the dead and tomorrow was another busy day. He thought he'd find the tools he wanted at the site.

The gully made a sharp turn. All at once they saw a great fire crackling merrily and people running busily to and fro.

Alimjan started and dropped the lamp. The flame licked the glass, smearing it with soot. Alimjan picked it up and looked at Smirnov.

"The whole team's here," he said in amazement. "The whole team to a man."

Drowsiness fled Smirnov. He gave a hearty laugh.

"Some fellows, those! Why, your stubbornness alone will play havoc with the rocks. No explosives needed."

They went up closer. Questions would have been superfluous. The men were removing the last of the rubble from the crevice. They knew it was time to start the planting of the cotton and, deciding to have a final go at the Kok-Bulak, they had cancelled their night's sleep.

The picture was truly fantastic: the blazing fire, the eerie black shapes of men leaping about the rocks, the primordial chaos of stone, and the steel glint of mattocks flashing in mighty swings.

Alimjan darted towards the crevice. Smirnov followed. Two men were working there. All the rubble had been cleared out, but there was still no water.

Bekbuta squatted in front of the exit and thrusting a long crowbar into the hole was trying to break down the caked mass blocking the water's way with unhurried but powerful blows.

Smirnov listened alertly: the blows did not give a ringing sharp sound but a muffled, squelching thud.

Suvankul, dripping with sweat, squatted beside Bekbuta. It was strenuous work and the two friends took turns.

"Well?" Alimjan asked cautiously.

"First rate," Bekbuta said cheerfully. "We've made a full metre's progress. But some damned thing is jamming the way. I just can't break it down. I haven't even chipped it so far."

A heap of earth removed from the opening lay at Bekbuta's feet. Smirnov was struck by the peculiar colour of this earth. He squatted down and taking Alimjan's lamp from him examined it closely and carefully.

"Well, well, well," he drawled at last. "That's curious earth you've got here, comrades. I've had occasion to see something like it before."

Alimjan picked up a handful of the greyish-black soil and gave Smirnov a puzzled look.

"What stuff it this, Ivan Nikitich?"

"It's anything but earth. It looks like water-soaked and rotten felt. You must wait a minute."

He pushed Bekbuta aside and picked up the crowbar. He struck a few times at the slab blocking the way, then straightened up, handed the crowbar back to Bekbuta and walked away.

"It's pretty clear. We have to resort to explosives."

"Why, what is it?" Alimjan asked apprehensively.

"It's simple enough. . . ."

Smirnov sat on a boulder close to the fire. Everyone was instantly drawn to him.

"Listen, friends. The basmaches and their masters did their damned best to do as much harm as they could to our economy. They tried to choke our mightiest mountain springs. I've had occasion to study their methods in the other mountainous regions of our republic. I presume that they gave a similar treatment to the Kok-Bulak. Their method was this: prior to the blast, they took a piece of hard wood, wrapped it in wet felt, and stuffed it into the spout of the spring. And whatever felt they had left over they drove in after the wooden stopper. This made a double wad, so to say. Understand?"

"What are we going to do now?" someone asked.

"Blow it up. It's a pity the demolition men have already left. We'll have to call them in again, that'll put us back ten days or so."

"It might be all of twelve," Alimjan said. "It doesn't suit us at all. The water of the Kok-Bulak must come to Altyn-Sai before our team does."

He got up and with resolute strides made for the crevice. He took the crowbar and set to work. Alimjan, Smirnov, Bekbuta and Suvankul took turns at this back-breaking job. Hour after hour the heavy, pointed crowbar kept striking at the stopper the basmaches had driven into the spring's throat. They had to do the work doubled up. Their muscles stretched and contracted like elastic. Now that they had probed the hole to a considerable

depth they had to hold the crowbar by the very end, balanced in their hands; this was too much of a strain and weakened the blows.

Towards morning Smirnov was utterly spent. And then he had a happy brainwave.

"How many long crowbars have we got?" he called to Bekbuta who was taking a rest as well.

"Three."

"Good! Stick them in the fire. Make the points white-hot."

Work went on at a brisker pace now. The triple-length crowbar probed deeper and deeper into the black maw.

When the sun began to rise Alimjan and Smirnov sat down by the fire to take a breathing spell and a smoke.

"It's a slow job. If we only had a stick of dynamite, just one!" Smirnov said with longing. "Just one blast and the thing would be done."

"Or if I had my 76-mm. here," Alimjan tuned in. "I'd have smashed that stopper to hell with my anti-tank gun."

"And you would have stopped the spring so thoroughly a ton of dynamite wouldn't open it up afterwards," Smirnov said with asperity. "No, my dear Alimjan, you'd better save your anti-tank shots for those who can't sleep for longing to wreck our peaceful labour. And in this battle here we'll try and manage without any artillery."

They fell silent. Smirnov rubbed the bristly stubble on his cheeks.

"I believe we've done away with at least half of the wad," he mused aloud. "So I think. After all, they couldn't have driven a whole tree into the channel, could they?"

Alimjan made no comment. He couldn't talk, he was so sleepy. Drowsily he remembered Aikiz with a book in her hands. She had been reading aloud and he was gazing at her clear profile and thinking that there was no one better, brighter or lovelier in the world than his girl. Aikiz had put down the book, her eyebrows drew together and her lips quivered.

"You're not listening, Alimjan-aka," she had said. "And it's such a wonderful book too.... It says that the most precious thing a man has is life. Man only lives once. And this life has to be lived in such a way that, dying, he could say: 'All my life, all my strength I have devoted to the struggle for the happiness of mankind.'"

Smirnov looked at his friend. Alimjan was fast asleep, leaning back against a boulder. His cigarette lay smoking on his knee. The leg of his trousers was already smouldering, and there was a smell of burning. But Alimjan was dead to the world, all his senses asleep.

Smirnov flipped the smoking cigarette off his knee and made himself as comfortable as he could.

"The chap's worn out," he thought. "Even though I am a bit older, I'm tougher. I'll just finish this cigarette.... As I was saying, I'm a bit older.... I'll just finish this...."

The cigarette slipped from his fingers. Smirnov was asleep.

He had no dreams. Alimjan dreamed he saw the edge

of the book on Aikiz's knee, but hard though he tried he could not see her face.

Suddenly a pair of strong hands grabbed Alimjan by the shoulders and gave him a furious shake; an ear-splitting voice yelled: "We've won, Alimjan-aka, we've won!"

Alimjan lunged forward and opened his eyes. He saw Bekbuta, dripping wet, dancing about before him, jerking his elbows and kicking up his legs. Yelling and dancing, he brought his ecstatic, beaming face close to Alimjan's. Bekbuta's cheek was one big bruise.

"Who hit you? When?" Alimjan asked, his voice husky with sleep.

"If a spring, kept in chains for thirty years, breaks free it'll naturally want to fling its arms about its liberator." Bekbuta stopped dancing about and spoke quite sensibly. "And if it's the Kok-Bulak who does the arm flinging—which by the way is roaring over there behind your back—the liberator will be hard put to it. But that's all right. I'd gladly take another ten slaps if only...."

Alimjan faced about. The liberated Kok-Bulak was gushing in a dazzling arc from the granite wall. Now and then something black flashed past in that powerful stream—either stones or lumps of slimy mud—and instantly vanished under water.

"It's belching out the remnants of the basmach wad," Smirnov said softly, gazing spell-bound at the gushing water.

"A pure mountain spring shouldn't be littered with all sorts of foul muck," Bekbuta said. "It's doing the right thing. Let it spit out all the muck there is."

Smirnov put his arm around Alimjan's shoulder and said, his voice jerky with emotion:

"You'd better hurry back to Altyn-Sai, friends. You can't catch up with the Kok-Bulak water now."

XVI

There was not a cloud in the sky. The poplars neither stirred nor murmured. The air was motionless. It was spring, but here it was as hot as in summer.

A dozen sheep and two donkeys nestled close to the trunk of a century-old elm on the outskirts of Altyn-Sai, but the shadow it cast was so short it didn't offer enough protection.

Noon.

The sultry day was alive with the chirping of grasshoppers, the grinding of cicadas, and the song of the larks hanging motionless over the fields. Dragonflies danced their graceful dance, poised above the flowers, and their crystalline wings glittered goldenly.

For ten days and ten nights now tractors have been working in this submontane region.

At the outset there was no one but women and young boys and girls to do the job of clearing the fields of shrubs, and little progress was made. But then Alimjan's team returned to the kolkhoz after their victory over the Kok-Bulak, soon followed by Kerim's team of Komsomols, the irrigation canal completed. Work in the fields was now in full swing. All the villagers of Altyn-Sai, except those engaged in building the dam, turned out in

full force. Cotton was being planted on upturned virgin soil.

Like a man, dying with thirst, would press his lips to a pail of icy spring water, drinking and never drinking his fill, so the villagers of Altyn-Sai worked without a break, impatient to quench the thirst of more and more land with the water they had procured for it.

The planting campaign, according to plan, was coming to an end. Powerful tractors roared and droned day and night, crawling over the vast tracts of land, upturning the fertile virgin soil.

The hot, dusty road leading from Altyn-Sai up the mountain was cut with hundreds of tracks, merging, separating, and criss-crossing. There was the herring-bone print of the kolkhoz lorry, the ribbed mark of tall cart wheels, the circular imprint of camel's feet, and the small prints of a donkey's hoofs, like the bottom of a glass.

The tracks turned off the main thoroughfare to the right and continued on the new road across the fields. This led to the recently built kolkhoz camp. Before the road was a week old, it had irrigation ditches running beside it and poplar plantings murmuring softly with their timid young leaves.

Alimjan paused for a moment at the turning, lost in admiration of the picture that unfolded before his eyes. With a free and easy stride, he started down the new field road towards the camp. Early that morning he had been to the District Party Committee; when he got back he left his horse in the stable and without looking in at his home started for the camp.

Alimjan heard someone running after him. He stopped and saw it was Kerim.

"How's everything, Kerim?" Alimjan asked when the other had caught up with him. "Getting finished in time?"

"My unit will be through with the planting tomorrow morning," Kerim said, panting. "The other Komsomol units won't be far behind either."

"Why aren't you out in the fields?"

"I've been to the smithy. We only expect the MTS service car to get here tonight, and our trailer link is not too reliable. So I had to have a bolt made at the smithy. Oh, I almost forgot, here's a letter for you. I dropped in at the village Soviet to get our general statement, and I took your letter along while I was about it. The statement wasn't ready, the secretary will bring it himself later on."

Alimjan glanced at the writing on the envelope. The letter was from Petrov. He felt the stirrings of a guilty conscience. "I'm a fine one," he thought. "He's written again and I haven't even bothered to answer his first letter yet. I never seem to find the time. But then *he* does, and he's as busy." He decided he'd read the letter when he got to the camp.

The kolkhoz field camp consisted of several light structures built of thin poles supporting a slate roof. Strips of red cloth with slogans painted on them were stretched between the poles, which all had plywood notice boards nailed to them. These carried posters, the kolkhoz wall newspaper and the results of the social emulation. A large table stood in the middle covered with a red cloth, and on it were stacked the latest periodicals and news-

papers. The dining-room was housed in a similar structure behind this rest and reading room.

The camp was built on a hillock to catch every breeze that was blowing. In the middle of summer, when the fields lay sweltering under a smothering pall of heat, the camp with its slate roof remained cool, and the tired workers found relief here when they took their midday rest.

A large pool had been sunk close by, equipped with a wooden aqueduct through which flowed the waters of the resurrected springs. Superfluous water was drained off on the opposite shore of the pool down a ditch leading to the kolkhoz orchard presently being planted. Saplings all around the pool had taken well, and in due course these trees would spread a thick green canopy over the water, proof against the hottest rays of the sun.

Kerim walked briskly to where his unit was working.

Alimjan went into the rest room. He sat down and ripped the envelope open. A small snapshot fell out. Alimjan gazed with brotherly tenderness at his friend's energetic face. Grigory was in uniform, and the three rows of ribbons on his chest brought back to Alimjan their fighting days. He put the snapshot back into the envelope and started reading the letter.

It was just a note, a single page in Grigory's large writing, and all his friend did was scold Alimjan for his silence.

Alimjan decided to write back there and then. He gave Grigory a detailed account of all his business and private affairs. He wrote about everything: the fight for water, Aikiz's rare qualities (for it was her idea to irrigate the

submontane regions), Smirnov's giftedness and ability, and the scolding Jurabayev had given Alimjan that morning. His pencil flew across the pages, and he only stopped when there were none left in the writing-pad.

"That's some letter! But at least I've given him all the news in one go," Alimjan thought.

He heard some people talking as they approached the camp.

"I couldn't stand it any longer, I thought I'd drop in for a few minutes and see how things were going here. I've got to hurry back to the dam." It was Aikiz.

Alimjan leaped to his feet and hurried to meet his beloved.

"Hello, Alimjan-aka," she said, coming in. "What a bulky letter, who have you written it to? It's too big to go in the mail!"

Pogodin, foreman of the tractor brigade, followed her in.

Alimjan pushed the writing-pad towards Aikiz.

"Read it," he said. "And please add a few words in your own hand, will you?"

"Oh, it's to your Russian friend! Why, I'll gladly write to someone as nice as he is."

Aikiz produced a fountain-pen from her bag and wrote:

"Dear Comrade Grigory, although we have never met I'm glad of this chance to give my warmest regards to you and Valya, and my kisses to your little one. Aikiz."

Alimjan blushed with happiness on reading what Aikiz had written. He folded the pages, took an envelope out of his field case, and wrote his friend's address on it.

"How's the dam getting on?" he asked, licking down the flap.

"It's growing," Aikiz said eagerly. "Alimjan-aka, if you only knew the quantities of stone that go into that dam!" She suddenly broke into very rapid speech, almost breathless with excitement. "Three or four more dams like this one would use up all the rock there is in the mountains, there wouldn't be a hillock left. You ought to come and take a look. Why haven't you been down for such a long time?"

"I'll come down this evening for sure," Alimjan said, remembering the scolding he had received from Jurabayev that morning.

Pogodin came in, took off his old cap with the shiny broken vizor, and wiped the copious sweat off his face with a handkerchief.

"It's sweltering," he rumbled in a deep voice which went well with his large and thickset body. "Rain's due."

"It won't rain," Alimjan said, "we don't want any rain just now."

"We certainly don't," Aikiz put in. "Rain at this stage would be disastrous to our cotton."

Pogodin suddenly stopped mopping his face and with the handkerchief clutched in his hand stood listening hard to something outside.

"Some trouble with the tractor again," he growled apprehensively.

Neither Aikiz nor Alimjan had noticed that one of the five tractors had been silenced. But the experienced ear of the mechanic instantly told him that of the five only four tractors were in action.

Aikiz and Alimjan went out and leaned on a low barrier surrounding the camp. The fields lay spread all around them and there stood the silenced tractor. The driver and his assistant were fussing about the plough, waving their arms and discussing the breakdown.

"What's wrong, there?" Pogodin gave a mighty yell.

The tractor driver turned and shouted something in reply.

"I'll go and see," Pogodin said anxiously.

"Wait a minute, we'll come with you," Aikiz offered. "Come on Alimjan-aka, let's go."

The three of them walked straight across the freshly ploughed but not yet harrowed field. Their legs sank ankle-deep in the loosened soil.

"What could the trouble be, I wonder? D'you think it'll take long to fix?" Aikiz asked, tripping to catch up with Pogodin's wide stride. He merely shrugged in reply.

"Out with it," he snapped at the driver nervously and harshly, and looked at his watch. "You've been standing idle for fifteen minutes already."

The driver pointed gloomily at a tamarisk root sticking treacherously out of the ground, and at the bent ploughshare.

"So what?" Pogodin roared. "Why didn't you replace it instead of standing and gaping at it? A man who knows his job would have fixed two shares in the fifteen minutes you had!"

The driver, smiling guiltily, busied himself with the ploughshare. Pogodin stood scolding him, choosing expressions that would cut the other to the quick. When he

was through he rolled up his sleeves and gave the man a hand.

Suvankul was quickly walking towards them from the far end of the field. Sweat rained down his plump, good-natured face. When he saw the wretched tamarisk root, he swung his mattock and struck at it. After a few blows the long, tough root was lying at his feet.

He wiped his sweating face with his sleeve, kicked the root aside, and still breathing noisily, addressed Alimjan.

"See how it is?" he said. "We would have finished ploughing last night, if it wasn't for one snag or another. Those tamarisk roots are plagueing us at the other end of the field too. We have to pull them out with our hands. But never mind, I promise you we'll be through in time."

"And does Bekbuta have nothing but snags too?" Aikiz asked, darting a sly look at the plot worked by Bekbuta and his team.

"Bekbuta's sure to win the emulation," Alimjan declared firmly. "He's a guardsman, a front-line fighter, he's always in the lead, whatever he takes up."

"Count your chickens when they're hatched," Suvankul's reply sounded composed enough, but there was anxiety in the look he gave Bekbuta's field—his best friend and rival. "Why does Bekbuta have three tractors and I only have two?" He suddenly turned angrily on Pogodin. "Why this discrepancy? If this is a competition we've got to have even chances."

"You're a funny fellow if you can't work it out for yourself," Pogodin said coming up. He had replaced the share and the plough was now in order. "Your kolkhoz got two extra tractors. How am I supposed to share them equally

among the teams when there are so many of them? What would you have me do, chop the tractors in half or something? When we're through with Bekbuta's lot we'll switch the two extra tractors to yours right away."

"I want to see him finished first..." Suvankul grumbled.

Just then the tractor gave a roar and leapt forward. Without finishing what he was going to say, Suvankul hurried after it.

"Everyone's hot on the job," Pogodin said. "Suvankul didn't even go home to sleep last night. He was so scared the tractor drivers might leave unploughed patches, he kept tramping the fields all night long."

This made Aikiz laugh.

"He's always so phlegmatic and slow," she said. "But this has made a different man of him."

"It's because he's doing something he always wanted to do," Alimjan said. "Our only trouble is that we're shorthanded. Hurry up and finish the dam and send everyone back here."

They all went on to Bekbuta's field.

XVII

The last days of the cotton planting were particularly strenuous. Pogodin personally drove the tractors over the more difficult tracts. That day, too, he had been at the job for several hours running.

At last, with a roar of triumph, his tractor pulled the seeder clear of the ploughed field on to the grassy virgin

tract, and stopped. Tired and covered with grease, Pogodin jumped down to the ground and stretched with such abandon that his joints cracked.

"We've won through," he said with a sigh of relief. "A day ahead of time, too."

He stood lost in contemplation of the rolling sunlit fields and the snow-capped mountains standing out sharply against the clear blue of the sky. He went back to his tractor and gave it a thorough check-up, the way an army doctor examines a soldier who wants to re-enlist.

The tractor driver, a young chap with only a year's experience, followed close on Pogodin's heels, jealously watching his every movement. This went on for quite a long time. Finally the young chap was fed up.

"Ivan-aka, why this check-up?" he asked, pretending he did not really mind. "My tractor is in perfect order. Just tell me where to work, and it'll cope with any job. You saw it in action earlier, didn't you? It's a first-rate machine."

"And what about its driver?" Pogodin asked with feigned sternness. "Is he first-rate too or is he one of those who just stumble along, never stirring to anything beyond a crawl?"

The young chap blushed dark red and, turning away from Pogodin, started scraping off bits of mud sticking to the radiator with his finger-nail.

"You're the best judge of this," he replied at long last trying to cover his confusion. "How should I know?"

Pogodin faced the boy about, put his hands on his shoulders and spoke to him with fatherly kindness.

"My dear boy, don't be angry, it never even occurred to me to scold you. A tractor's the same as a horse. It likes

to be well treated, to be kept clean, watered and vetted in time. A tractor'll give you better service once it's made sure of your loving care. It'll do any job for you. Here you've been saying that your tractor is first-rate. But it's a dead thing without a man to drive it. What is it then—nothing but lifeless metal. But once a man climbs into the seat it comes to life. That's the way it is, my young friend. It takes a first-rate man to make a first-rate machine."

The boy was overjoyed with his elder's praise.

"Thank you, Ivan-aka!" he mumbled. "It was so well put."

"Good, now take you tractor to Altyn-Sai. We'll vet it, it needs service."

Pogodin took his jacket and his field case from the driver's seat, and with leisurely step started towards the spring at the foot of the Hill of Slavery.

With his leather jacket slung on his shoulder and his field case swinging in his hand, Pogodin walked across a meadow bright with flowers. Spring was at its best.

Cicadas rattled in the tall grass; dragonflies flitted above the flowers, their rigid glass-like wings glittering; fat, clumsy beetles soared buzzing over the ground. Larks, drunk with spring and sunlight, trilled their song high up in the sky.

Pogodin breathed in with delight the soft mountain breeze, fragrant with snow and wild flowers. His mind was easy. A fortnight ago, at a Party meeting, he had taken the pledge to carry through the sowing campaign for the new cotton-planting kolkhoz by a certain date and with no less than excellent results. He had achieved it. And now he could take a rest and a stroll through the

bright meadow to the icy spring. He had fulfilled his pledge of a Communist.

There was more work ahead. Planting was only the beginning. Close upon the heels of the seeders would come the cultivators, the hillers, the sprinklers, and the next thing they knew it would be reaping time.

Cotton reapers were due for delivery that year. It was time to start training people to operate them, to decide who was to be trusted with the job. Pogodin was so busy with his thoughts, he covered the distance to the Hill of Slavery without noticing it.

The spring, discovered by Aikiz three months ago, was gleaming in the sun like a great bowl filled to the rim with clear water. The Komsomols, working on this site, had rooted out the stumps of the old plane-trees and cut away that part of the hill from which the spring issued, leaving a large grey stone jutting over the pool, with the spring flowing from under it.

Pogodin hurried his step. Without pausing he flung his leather jacket and field case far away, opened the neck of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves, with the pleasurable anticipation of bathing his hot face, neck and hands with the icy water.

"I'll wash first and then I'll lie down in the grass here for a tiny snooze, just a few minutes ... a hundred, or two...."

He bent low over the water and started back in surprise; a girl's laughing face was mirrored in the clear pool.

"Lola," Pogodin stammered and closed his eyes to shut

out the vision. He was certain his mind, wearied with insufficient sleep, was playing a trick on him.

He looked again and again, but the girl's face did not vanish. Pogodin straightened up and glanced about him. There was Lola in the flesh sitting on the jutting stone.

Pogodin had often seen Alimjan's sister before. In his heart of hearts he knew that he would never meet a girl as wonderful as Lola again. He had never seen her close to before, and now the girl's glowing beauty startled him.

The moment was embarrassing for both of them. Lola threw curious glances at Pogodin and said nothing.

"Hello, Lola," he ventured to say at last.

"Hello, Ivan Borisovich," she replied. "Have you finished the planting?"

"Yes, just a minute ago. It's awfully hot and dusty out there. That's why I came here, to freshen myself up."

"And I scared you away!"

"Oh, no, not at all. I was a bit confused, that's true. Your being here was so unexpected."

"Go ahead and wash."

Lola turned her back to him. Pogodin bent down and stretched his cupped hands to get some water. But his hands remained in mid-air. It seemed a sacrilege to him to touch the water which had mirrored Lola's face only a moment ago.

He moved away. Lola was still sitting immobile on the stone.

"You won't go away, will you, while I potter about here?" he asked in a business-like tone.

"No, I won't."

Pogodin scrubbed hard at his hands, black with grease, calling himself names for not bringing a piece of soap along. He'd never get the grease off, no matter how hard he scrubbed. In his despair he scooped up some white sand from the bottom of the pool and started rubbing his hands with that. It helped. He gave his face a good rub-down with the sand too, wiped it with his handkerchief, combed his hair, pulled his shirt down neatly, and started towards Lola. The scratches on his face hurt a little, but his whole body tingled with renewed vigour.

"Tell me about yourself. Tell me how is our dear Halim-bobo getting on with his orchard?" he asked.

"We got through with planting the trees today. Halim-bobo has gone to take a rest, and everyone else is having dinner. I was on my way home, too, but I stopped at the spring, and then I suddenly saw you."

"Is that a poppy you are holding?"

"Yes, a wild poppy. I was going to pick an armful. Plenty of flowers make a room look lovely, I think."

"What are we waiting for then? Let me help you, Lola. Look at all those flowers."

Lola ran down the hill and silently led the way. As he picked the flowers Pogodin hated himself for being so tongue-tied. Lola must be bored with him. But the harder he tried to think of something amusing to say, the poorer was his imagination. After all, he couldn't talk to Lola about the servicing of tractors, or the shortage of lead which did not seem to worry the MTS sufficiently.

They went on picking the flowers in an awkward silence. But when their arms were full and they sat down

on the slope to tie them into bouquets, conversation just started to flow without any effort on their part.

They began by trying to establish when and where they had seen one another for the first time. But their recollections differed. Pogodin insisted that he had seen her first at the local talent show last autumn, whereas Lola insisted that the first time they met was in Aikiz's office at the village Soviet that winter. They dropped the argument and talked about other things.

"Are you planning to go on with you studies, Ivan Borisovich?" Lola asked.

The question caught Pogodin unawares.

"I don't know, it's quite likely," he answered vaguely.

"You drove a tank in the war, didn't you? Can you manage a plane too?"

He would have liked to say yes. A man who could also pilot a plane would certainly rouse some interest in her. But truth above all, even in trifles!

"No, I can't," he sighed. "I did drive a tank, and some said I drove it well, but a plane, no.... And are you planning to go on with your studies?"

"I certainly am, Ivan Borisovich." Her tone was resolute.

"When are you going to start?"

"This autumn."

"What department have you in mind?"

"The horticultural. I want to follow in Michurin's footsteps." Lola remained silent for a moment or two. "And in everything else I want to become like Aikiz. As brave, strong, resolute and beautiful."

"There are girls in Altyn-Sai more beautiful than Aikiz," Pogodin blurted out.

"Oh no. Don't you argue with me anyway! I've known her since I was an infant."

Pogodin had no wish to argue with her, but this was what their pleasant conversation had come to.

"And Alimjan?" he asked at random.

"What about Alimjan? You do have a strange way of popping questions. I think that Alimjan is the smartest and most attractive man in Altyn-Sai." She tried to correct her rudeness and said: "That is, why did I say 'the most attractive man' anyway? What I meant to say was that he was the most suitable man for Aikiz. He's clever, he's a man of advanced thought, and . . . well, everything. . . ." She knew that she was getting incoherent.

Pogodin tried to help her out.

"Sure, Aikiz and Alimjan suit each other perfectly," he said quickly. "He's like a young sturdy oak that no hurricane can break. And she . . . however, it isn't right somehow to liken a girl to a tree. A girl should be compared to a star."

But he did not have a chance to compare Lola to a star, for afraid that he really would, she jumped up and said she had to hurry home.

XVIII

A hurricane raged in the mountains all night long. Black, ominous clouds rolled heavily over the ridge and crawled down into the valleys. When they got to the foot

of the mountain they spread low over the ground, moving languidly. Mighty gusts of wind broke the white trunks of poplars and bent low the plane-trees. But even this furious wind failed to drive the clouds away.

The hurricane raged and howled. Lightning flashed in the mountains, the roar of thunder rolled down the gullies and crevices, but there was not a drop of rain. Day broke in sullenness. The sun could not pierce the leaden mass of clouds, and only in the east a faint glow filtered between them.

Alimjan woke up with a heavy head. He let his feet down and rushed to the window. The windows of the other houses and the grass were lustreless and grey. Sand dust was billowing down the street. The weather puzzled Alimjan. It had been fine last night when he and Kadyrov made the rounds of the fields inspecting the sprouting young cotton shoots. The sunset had been mellow, crimson and gold. Last night he and Kadyrov had thought it time to start thinning out the shoots. But the hurricane would make a mess of all their plans.

Lola was still asleep. Alimjan hardly touched his breakfast, food stuck in his throat. He picked up his newspapers and put on his cap.

Where should he go? To Aikiz? He tried to think of a good excuse to go to her. There were two.

The first was that an article had appeared in yesterday's paper about the Altyn-Sai kolkhozes. Not a bad article, skilfully written. It told of the Communists of the Stalin Kolkhoz leading the people in battle to procure water, of the united efforts of the neighbouring kolkhozes, of their hard-won victory and the upturned acres of vir-

gin soil, of the dam they were completing so successfully. Alimjan loved reading because it stirred and roused his soul. He loved it particularly just then, because the article devoted a lot of space to Aikiz Umurzakova, a young Communist, chairman of the Altyn-Sai village Soviet, organizer of the popular endeavour for the reclamation of springs, and superviser of the dam construction site, the most important section of the project.

Naturally, the kolkhoz postman would have delivered the newspaper to Umurzak-ata's home as well. But the old man could not read very well and a long article like this would be too much for him. And Aikiz was not the sort of girl to read to her father an article that praised her so highly. It followed, therefore, that Alimjan, being the secretary of the kolkhoz Party organization, was duty bound to read to Umurzak-ata this flattering article which concerned the kolkhoz as a whole.

The second excuse was that Aikiz had not been to the kolkhoz for several days. Alimjan had gone down to the dam three times, but he had missed Aikiz on every occasion. In addition to the dam, she had the village Soviet on her hands, to say nothing of all those submontane kolkhoz fields where cotton was planted for the first time. Alimjan had not seen her since the day she came to camp with Pogodin. Their meeting ended rather queerly that day. He had said to her at parting. "It's ten days since the Kok-Bulak water has come to Altyn-Sai, and you told me your answer would follow in a fortnight. And so, in three days' time, with your permission I shall speak to Umurzak-ata." Instead of an answer she had shaken her head slowly and paled. Why was Aikiz tormenting him

so? Didn't she love him any more? But he refused to believe it. She had a loyal heart. He hated himself for being so timid and tongue-tied where Aikiz was concerned; he knew he should turn a new leaf.

No sooner had he shut the gate behind him than the icy wind lashed out at him. Bending low, he hurried down the street.

He saw groups of people standing at practically every gate watching the slumping dark clouds with apprehension.

Alimjan approached the gate he knew so well with a vague, panicky feeling. He had walked through it so often thrilling at the thought of seeing Aikiz. Everything here held a special meaning for him. There wasn't a stone in the courtyard her light feet had not trod. Her quick hand had touched this gate, the porch railing, the edge of the *sula*, and the door leading into the house.

Alimjan gave the gate a pull.

Aikiz was in the courtyard. Mattock in hand, she was directing the ditch water into her flower beds.

"Hello, Aikiz," he said slowly.

Aikiz was as natural and composed as ever.

He took the mattock from her and continued with her work. She sat down on the edge of the *sula* and silently watched him clear the way for the water, removing lumps of dry mud and small stones from its path.

Aikiz was thinking: "I was on the brink of despair, yet he did not say a word to me. He neither scolded nor heartened me. Why? Was he sparing me? Was it pity? He hasn't changed at all, but what is in his heart, in its very depths? Does he know everything? Does he know of the

scolding Smirnov gave me? Does he know that our people turned away from me then?"

She watched his back, stooping and straightening up, and the damp clots of earth his mattock sent flying.

"He couldn't help knowing," she thought. "He knows everything that's going on. He pitied me the way one pities the weak. And I refuse to be pitied. Even by him. I'm not weak. Does he love me? Yes, he does. But has he faith in me?"

Aikiz sat with her hands lying limply in her lap. She wanted to cry.

"What's wrong, Aikiz?" Alimjan asked without breaking off or turning round. "You've quite forgotten us, we haven't seen the light in your eyes for days."

"Has anyone noticed my absence?" she asked. Her voice shook.

"Of course, Aikiz."

"The days just seemed to flash past."

"It's bad of you, Aikiz."

"What's bad?"

"To forget about us."

"Is that why you came?"

"Yes."

"To find out why I haven't been to the kolkhoz lately?"

"No, not only that. Or rather, that too."

"I was very busy, Alimjan-aka. The dam will be finished in a few days. Work is hottest now. And besides, some of the kolkhozes aren't doing so well, and that's where I should spend most of my time rather than where everything's going fine."

Alimjan looked hard at her. No, her mask of composure did not deceive him. Aikiz was hiding something from him, and once again panic seized him. A secret, unexpressed meaning lurked behind her every word. This frightened Alimjan. He wanted to evade confidences, to put them off indefinitely.

"All our cotton fields are doing well," he said. "I wish you'd come and take a look, our people might think that you're giving preference to the other kolkhozes. Honestly, the cotton's sprouting exceptionally well. You'll be quite proud of our kolkhoz, truly you will."

"I should hope so—the kolkhoz which took the initiative in the fight for water!"

"We came out first in the planting and we'll come out first in the reaping as well. Do come and have a look, will you?"

Aikiz said nothing.

"How is Suvankul doing?" she asked with lively interest. "Remember all those tamarisk roots in his field? Pogodin certainly had a hard time."

"One couldn't forget those roots even if one wanted to. It was a cursed spot. But the cotton's doing well there, no worse than in my field. There was something I wanted to ask you, Aikiz: did you see the paper yesterday?"

Aikiz's face was flooded with colour. She pressed her hands to her flaming cheeks.

"I did. I didn't like the article at all. There was too much gilt put on. According to that article we're all heroes to a man, wise and efficient—an outstanding sort of a kolkhoz. But it's not true at all, you know. We're just ordinary Soviet people and we've got all kinds: there are

those who make strides and those who just stumble along. We've got idlers too. And some of the executives are not entirely without fault either. Did you come here to make fun of me?"

Her face showed pale between her sunburnt fingers. Her cold, almost hostile eyes looked straight into Alimjan's.

He didn't know what to say. Fortunately, Umurzak-ata came up to them just then, walking softly on the grass.

"I don't know what the paper says about our kolkhoz, but in my opinion our people deserve praise. Encouragement pours new strength into a man. Say what you may, we did more work than the other kolkhozes in clearing the springs, and our fields needed more stubbing too, what with tamarisk, camel's thorn and sak-saoul roots snagging the plough across half of the area at least. Pogodin and his tractors helped us a lot, we're certainly grateful. Our neighbours' lot was easier, they hardly had to do any stubbing at all. And so we can say it quite honestly that our kolkhoz did a good job. The people who wrote the article must know their business, since they're praising our people."

"We must remember one thing though, we've got plenty of shrubby land still," Alimjan said.

"We shan't have to stub it with our bare hands," Aikiz said coldly. "You know very well that our Government has adopted a resolution to develop the Altyn-Sai lands and to allot us additional machinery. By autumn we'll upturn all the tracts on the right bank of the Altyn-Sai and break them up into cotton plantations and orchards."

Alimjan finished watering the flowers and blocked the

course of the ditch water. He put down his mattock and went up to Umurzak-ata.

"Now, son, read me the article about us," the old man said.

"Very gladly, Father. Your daughter's mentioned in it too. . . ." Alimjan saw his mistake too late.

Aikiz jumped up angrily.

"Afterwards, Father, I'll read it to you myself. Invite our guest in. Tea's been getting cold," she cried and ran into the house.

The howling of the hurricane sounded but faintly in the well-protected courtyard, though the wind did not abate its fury. Clouds of dust, twigs and leaves whirled swiftly over the garden wall and the roof. Ominous thunder-clouds, shrouding the light of day, sailed grim and low over the ground.

Umurzak-ata led the way into the house, glancing warily at the sinister sky and muttering curses.

A clean table-cloth was spread on the large antique Turkmen carpet. A samovar stood steaming beside it. There was a dish of well-baked cakes and earthenware bowls of *shurpa*. It was all so dear and familiar to Alimjan.

They sat down. Umurzak-ata had no sooner picked up his bowl of *shurpa* than a blast of wind tore open the window with a crash. Glass tinkled plaintively. Umurzak-ata got up and thrust his head out of the window. A vast, bluish-black cloud was creeping down on the village from the mountains. He closed the window and slowly sank down on the carpet again.

The room grew dark.

"Trouble, children, trouble."

Thunder crashed so mightily that the walls shook. The tea kettle brewing on top of the samovar funnel jumped.

Aikiz turned pale and clutched at her heart.

"What a crash! My heart skipped a beat." She got up and spoke nervously, "Working day has begun . . . our people are out there on the dam. I must go to them."

"It wasn't in the mountains. It crashed quite near," Alimjan said, putting his spoon down. "I'll go and look. I'm afraid it was next door. . . ."

"It's no use, son, don't go," Umurzak-ata said sorrowfully. "Science may be powerful but we're still helpless against the elements. How will you hold back the lightning? What is your weapon against it?"

"Lightning rods will protect us. And we have to help our comrades when they're in trouble."

Alimjan threw open the window.

The street was swallowed up in dark grey dusk. The thunder-cloud was hanging low over Altyn-Sai. The hurricane had slackened its fury. The wind was now furtively rustling through the leaves which still clung to the poplars.

The stillness lasted only a few seconds. Thunder rolled again, not as deafening now, and with it the first heavy drops of rain fell on the ground.

Umurzak-ata and Aikiz joined Alimjan at the window.

The rain developed into a tropical, roaring downpour. Long, twisted streams of water, pliant like steel rods, straining against the onslaughts of the wind, struck the ground, the roofs and the trees.

"Some rain! With Allah's help it'll soon be over before it does too much damage," Umurzak-ata said.

Shattering this timid hope, something pinged against the glass pane. A tiny white pellet struck the window ledge, bounced off and rolled over the wet ground. And instantly thousands of these tiny white pellets began to bounce off the road, hit the window-panes and swish through the poplar leaves.

Umurzak-ata pushed the others aside and stretched his cupped hands out of the window.

"Hailstones!" he gasped with despair, staring at the icy blue balls in his hands. "Hailstones!" he repeated staring at Aikiz. "Trouble, my children, great trouble!"

With a loud cry he dropped the hailstones on the floor, flung up his arms, and jumped out of the window. He landed on his hands and knees, straightened up at once and, bare-footed, rushed down the street in the direction of the cotton fields.

It all happened so swiftly, neither Aikiz nor Alimjan could stop him.

As fleet-footed as a young man, Umurzak-ata ran on. On the edge of the village, a century-old elm struck down by lightning lay smoking on the ground, but Umurzak-ata did not give it a glance. He ran on and on. Hail and wind lashed at his face and his uncovered head. He shielded his eyes with his hand. His shirt, gaping open to the waist, was dripping wet.

The hailstorm was gaining in strength. The stones, tiny at first, were now the size of a good cotton seed.

Umurzak-ata turned off on the road across the fields. He tripped and fell heavily on the ground, bruising his

chest. He lay gasping for a long while. His face, his long beard and his white shirt were covered with mud. He recovered his breath, got up and ran on.

He hardly knew why he was running, and what he could do to help. He couldn't protect with his frail body all those acres of cotton planted by his team so hopefully and thinned out and earthed up with such loving care.

"Trouble! Great trouble, my children!" he muttered wildly as he ran on.

A group of farmers, who had wanted to start work early, were huddled in the doorway of the rest-room. When they sighted Umurzak-ata they shouted to him to come and take cover under the roof. But he ran past. His bare feet crunched over the hailstones carpeting the ground.

Umurzak-ata reached his plot and stopped. The field was covered with a thick layer of icy pellets. A groan escaped his chest, he clutched his head in despair. His knees gave way and he slumped down to the ground.

Alimjan caught up with him at last. He had stopped to collect the old man's robe and boots for him. Breathing heavily, Alimjan kneeled beside Umurzak-ata. The old man clung to Alimjan and broke into bitter, hopeless tears. His shoulders shook with sobbing.

"Our cotton's perished!" he moaned. "What shall we do? What shall we do?"

"Don't lose heart, Father," Alimjan said, helping Umurzak-ata who had gone weak with distress into his robe. "After all it's nature, there was nothing we could do about it. It's a calamity that might happen anywhere."

The hailstorm was abating. Through its thinning veil

Alimjan saw someone riding towards them. It was Aikiz.

She reined in Baichibar, jumped down and rushed to her father.

"Father, listen, the hailstorm's over."

"It's too late, daughter. Look at all the damage it has done, curse it." With a shaky hand the old man drew a half circle.

Aikiz caught his hand and faced him about towards the Kok-Tau.

"Look there, Father. The clouds are going. The sun will soon come out and melt the hailstones. I've telephoned through to Jurabayev, he'll be here any moment now."

Indeed, the thunder-cloud, torn into shreds by the wind, was fast receding to the west, its fury spent. The mountain tops were already gleaming in the sun.

"It's too late, daughter, too late," Umurzak-ata kept muttering despondently.

And now men came hurrying from every direction. When they got to their lots they stopped short, their arms drooping limply, their heads bowed.

"Father, listen," Aikiz said, deliberately loud. "I have to go to the dam and then on to the other farms. This isn't our own personal disaster, there's been hail in the other kolkhozes too. Don't lose heart, Father." Aikiz leapt into the saddle and galloped away.

"We've never met disaster like this before," Alimjan said. "And down in the lowlands, they say, it hails two or even three times a year. Those experienced cotton planters have learned a way to save their losses. They

manage to get a rich crop in spite of hail damaging their plantings. We should get them to teach us."

A car rolled up bringing Jurabayev and the district agronomist. Jurabayev went straight to Umurzak-ata and hugged him.

"Don't worry, Father. There's a sure way to fight this calamity too," he said very loudly for all to hear.

People clustered close to Jurabayev. A ray of hope lighted Umurzak-ata's sad eyes.

"Say it again, son. Did you say that we could bring this dead field back to life? Did you say that we could save our crop and reap a good harvest?"

"We've got to do it. But it'll take a lot of hard work. We'll save the cotton if we don't weaken."

"We're not afraid of hard work, son. Tell us what we ought to do."

"Without wasting an hour you've got to put in some fertilizer, water the plants and earth them up high. The roots are safe and sound, that means they'll sprout new leaves. And where they don't, it'll have to be planted anew. All the neighbouring kolkhozes will come and help, it's a common endeavour. Our district agronomist will give you full directions. So you see, Father, it's too early to despair."

Jurabayev, amid a crowd of farmers, moved down the plantation. The carpeting of hailstones looked glaringly white against the sullen grey clouds on the horizon. The slanting rays of the sun shone down from behind the mountains, catching dazzling sparks in the hailstones steaming faintly like dew melting in the dawn. Here and

there they had already melted, revealing patches of black, sodden soil.

After making the round of the fields Jurabayev came back to his car, still followed by the farmers. Umurzak-ata was so shaken he could hardly stand.

"Listen to me, Father," Jurabayev said to him firmly. "I'll take you home in my car now. It'll be at least three or four hours before we can begin work here. So come home and lie down until then. Please do. You've got to take care of yourself, dear Umurzak-ata."

The old man meekly got into the car, Jurabayev sat behind the wheel. Just as they were ready to start, Umurzak-ata saw some strangers measuring his plot with a tape-line.

"Who are those people? What are they up to?" he cried indignantly and slipped out of the car as nimbly as he had earlier jumped out of his window.

"Why, they're our people! The Government insurance men!" Jurabayev called after him cheerfully.

But Umurzak-ata would not heed him. He hurried on. His team mates followed their leader.

"Where d'you come from, people?" Umurzak-ata asked the strangers gruffly.

One of the men, clutching a canvas briefcase under his arm, was doing a calculation in his note-book. He looked up at the old man, twitched his eyebrows, and made his unhurried reply.

"I, personally, belong to the Government insurance office. And this comrade," he indicated the other man with a nod, "belongs to the MTS. We've come to determine the extent of the damage and make a statement."

"Why, it's all past now," Umurzak-ata pleaded, pressing his palms to his heart. "Hail has damaged our cotton. But why gauge it? Why waste your energy? Don't do it, my sons. Leave us in peace and don't waste your own time."

"I don't quite understand. Your cotton is insured. Your kolkhoz will be paid damages against this statement. The Government will compensate the kolkhoz in full."

"What did you say? The Government will pay the damages? Why, a hailstorm has ruined our cotton through Allah's negligence, and you want to pay us for this with our Government's money? Oh no, my dear, we aren't sure yet if Allah was powerful enough to kill our crop."

The men on Umurzak-ata's team crowded around him.

"D'you know what, son?" Umurzak-ata continued, tugging the stranger by his sleeve. "I'm an ignorant old man, but this is the way I see it: according to the law we've got to save every penny of our Government's money. I'm almost eighty, but I, too, took up a mattock in order to be of some use to the state. Would my conscience let me accept money for crops that have perished in a hailstorm? I haven't delivered any cotton to the state yet, have I? Before the Revolution I was more destitute than a pauper, but no one ever handed me a crust. I shivered from cold in winter, but no one covered my body. The Soviet Government released me from my bonds of slavery, poverty and humility, and gave me back my dignity. And now you want me to demand money from it for something I haven't even grown yet? Or perhaps you are thinking that my soul is blacker than night, and my heart is a lifeless stone? Oh no! I sent

both my sons to defend my country from the enemy and they did not bring shame on their old father. They fought like lions and died like heroes. They lay down their young lives so that our country should live and prosper. So how could I take money for cotton which, perhaps, I shall not be able to reap?"

"Father..." the stranger tried to put a word in.

"No, son, no," Umurzak-ata repeated with insistence. "We're grateful to the Government for its great concern. And to you, too, son. But remember: I shall work while there's breath in my body, and it's not money I want. I'm not alone in this. Ask Hampakul, his son fell in battle defending Moscow, doesn't he think as I do? Ask Mansur-ata. Two of his sons are officers. Ask him, will he take the Government's money?"

There was a slow rumble of voices. Seventy-year-old Mansur-ata, his hair a yellowish white, stepped forward and spoke on behalf of all of them:

"Umurzak-ata is right. Our hearts repeat what he has said."

The insurance man made another attempt at persuasion:

"But can't you understand? There's been a hailstorm and it's my duty to draw up a statement of the damage."

"Why do it? Comrade Jurabayev told us that if we tried hard our cotton would come back to life. We're not afraid of work. We'll fight back our cotton. Our kolkhoz has planned to gather in 30 bushels per acre, and that much at least we'll do. So come back in the autumn, son, and see it for yourself. And now I beg you most respectfully, don't gauge it."

Umurzak-ata slowly walked away. Jurabayev took his arm and helped him into the car. They started off. Puddles of melted hailstones gleamed in the road, reflecting the fathomless sky above.

XIX

"No, you don't seem to understand, Comrade Kadyrov," Jurabayev said feeling his irritation mounting. He took a cigarette out of his case and started crushing it between his fingers.

Whenever he was confronted with obtuseness, backwardness and indifference, and felt he was losing his temper, he invariably took out a cigarette and crushed it slowly in his fingers, letting the tobacco dribble into the ash-tray. It took him about three crushed cigarettes to regain his self-control, and then he would calmly light the next and continue with the conversation.

Jurabayev had spent four solid hours inspecting the damaged fields. In the afternoon he had driven back to Altyn-Sai. All the members of the kolkhoz board were gathered in Kadyrov's office.

"Comrades, we are expecting delivery of electric tractors. What would you do, Comrade Kadyrov, if your kolkhoz received an electric tractor from us tomorrow?" Jurabayev asked.

"We'd start it working," Kadyrov gave a pat answer.

Jurabayev took a cigarette out but did not crush it. Kadyrov fell silent for he sensed Jurabayev's annoyance with him and it baffled him.

"And can you ensure power to work it?"

"Why not, of course we can. Our power station is functioning properly. As soon as we complete the dam we'll have plenty of energy. Of course, it's difficult to promise that we'd bring it to the fields right away, but we'll think it over."

"We'll think it over for a year or two, and then we'll think of something," Bekbuta could not refrain from putting in scornfully.

Kadyrov merely glared at him.

"In my opinion Comrade Kadyrov is not right," Alimjan said.

It was not a meeting, it was just a casual conversation, but from force of habit Alimjan stood up to speak.

"Kadyrov is used to small heights. He can't see further than today. He won't scale any heights, because he's afraid of getting dizzy. But that won't do. Kadyrov thinks that once we have electric light burning in our homes and streets it means our kolkhoz is electrified. That's a crude way of looking at it. Although we do have electric light, we can't say that our kolkhoz is fully electrified. We work our chaff-cutter by hand. We plough and thresh by means of an ordinary tractor, and we're still using a water mill. Is that electrification? Our power station barely gives us 25 kilowatts and we need all of two hundred to operate all our agricultural machines. Therefore I consider that we should commence building a power station forthwith. It'll cater to our needs of tomorrow as well as of those of today. I venture to hope that it won't be just a single electric tractor working our fields."

"So one's not enough for your kolkhoz? You'd like to have several, would you?" Jurabayev said, lighting up.

"Even one is more than we can handle today, there isn't enough power for it. But, Comrade Jurabayev, it's on our land that the dam has been built, and it's only there that we could build the power station. What would be the outcome? All the kolkhozes belonging to our village Soviet would demand power from us, and they would be quite justified. In other words, we should build the power station with a view to embracing our neighbours' needs as well. All the kolkhozes should unite in building a new, powerful station."

Jurabayev left his seat and paced the room to still his excitement. He stopped with his back to the window.

"And now let us give this matter a thorough study," he said slowly, weighing up his words. "Comrade Alimjan here says that we should take tomorrow's needs into account when building a new power station. To this I will add that Comrade Smirnov has already drawn up a plan for it, and it is now being elaborated by a group of specialists. The rest is up to you. If members of our kolkhozes will support Smirnov's initiative we shall undertake construction. The matter has to be put up for discussion within the next few days."

Once again Jurabayev drove his car past the damaged cotton plantations, the storm-tousled orchards, and the charred elm-tree. The cotton plantations were already teeming with activity, for all the villagers, old and young, had come out in full force to save their crop. Tractors hauled cultivators, men watered the fields, and

worked along the rows, carefully smoothing out every hailstoned leaf.

On the outskirts of Altyn-Sai Jurabayev met several lorries loaded with fertilizer.

XX

Alimjan arrived at the district office very early in the morning for he wanted to be back in Altyn-Sai by ten or eleven. But he was told that Comrade Jurabayev was away and would not be back till noon.

Alimjan had more calls to make and problems to settle, and it was not till two in the afternoon that he rode back to the District Party Committee office and dismounted in the shady courtyard.

"Is he back?" Alimjan nodded towards Jurabayev's door.

"Yes."

"Can I go in?"

"Go ahead. He's been asking about you."

Alimjan walked in and found Smirnov rolling up his blueprints, ready to leave.

"You were a bit late, but we'll put it right," Jurabayev said to Alimjan when Smirnov had left. "Go and see Comrade Smirnov later on. He'll show you the rough plans of the power station project. Of course they're only tentative plans, but for all that they're very interesting and convincing. We'll leave that for the moment. Sit down and tell me how's everything at the kolkhoz? How is the cotton, has it recovered after the hailstorm?"

"It has, the cotton's not bad. The fertilizer helped a lot. We had to do some replanting though."

"I know. You sweated hard over it but you'll have a good crop for your pains."

Alimjan gave a sudden broad smile.

"What's the joke?"

"It isn't a joke, Comrade Jurabayev. I simply pictured our fields, they're so lush just now, it's a joy to look at them. And we've almost completed the dam. We'll hold a gala opening in three or four days' time. I wish you'd come and take a look. You haven't been our way since after the hail."

"Is that all the entertainment you can give me? Is the cotton and the dam all you have to show me?" Jurabayev said with a cunning smile.

"But what else could I show you except our dam and our cotton?" Alimjan looked puzzled.

"I don't only mean showing me... I mean, is there nothing else you'd like to invite me to?"

"Why, you're always welcome. At any hour of the day or night."

"Listen, Alimjan, how old are you?" Jurabayev suddenly asked.

"I'm twenty-six," Alimjan spaced out the words. "I suppose he wants to send me somewhere," he thought. "Perhaps to study for a Party worker? But it's summer, the busy season...." Alimjan was lost in surmises.

"Twenty-six, you say, and you're still unattached," Jurabayev said.

Alimjan's face turned red. If he did not love Aikiz he would have laughed it off. But he loved her and he would

not joke about it. He sensed sympathy in Jurabayev's tone. He didn't know whether he should feel hurt by this sympathy or not, and his thoughts got tangled.

"I never had the time, Comrade Jurabayev," he answered shakily. "I was so busy studying and working that, frankly, I never had the time to think about it."

Jurabayev frowned and said nothing. This moment of silence helped Alimjan to pull himself together. He was used to confiding everything in Jurabayev. He'd help him now to work out his private problem, to see the light. And hesitating no longer, Alimjan told him the whole story of his love for Aikiz.

Jurabayev heard him out in silence. A typewriter started clattering in the next room. Jurabayev puckered his brow and then the lines were smoothed out again. Alimjan told him about coming to see Aikiz that morning with the newspaper article and suddenly sensing her estrangement.

"Has it ever occurred to you why Aikiz was putting off the answer for so long?" Jurabayev spoke at last.

"I've thought about it."

"And what was the conclusion?"

"I'll tell you honestly, I don't know, Comrade Jurabayev."

"Haven't you asked her?"

"No, I was afraid she'd mind."

"Or perhaps you were afraid she'd refuse you?"

"Perhaps, or rather that was just why."

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" Jurabayev said with kindly scorn. "A man as brave as Alimjan used to be! A real eagle! He never feared the enemy in war-time, he

led men in attack, he stormed the Kok-Bulak, and when faced with the girl he loves he folds his wings, defeated. See what love does to a man!"

Alimjan did not utter a sound.

"Look here, this is what we'll do," Jurabayev spoke getting up. "I'll come to Altyn-Sai tomorrow and talk to Aikiz. It wouldn't be a bad idea to talk to old Umurzak-ata either. You know he adores Aikiz, her happiness means more than life itself to him. He's fond of you, I know. I'm sure everything will be all right. Cheer up. There's a good saying the Russians have: night brings counsel."

XXI

When Aikiz came to make her rounds of the new cotton fields she usually tied Baichibar to a post beside the camp and walked through the plots all by herself, making a note of what needed doing. After that she would find the team foreman and give him her directions, such as adding fertilizer where necessary and regulating the watering of the plants.

That morning Aikiz first rode to the Stalin Kolkhoz; she got to Bekbuta's plot and dismounted. Bekbuta, sighting her from afar, hurried to meet her, took Baichibar by the bridle and tethered him to a post which had a little heap of clover at the foot all ready for him.

"Where shall we go first? Which plot d'you want to see?" he asked.

"I'll go to all the plots and look over all the fields," Aikiz said. "I'll go by myself... don't trouble. You're

the foreman of your team, you've got your hands full, I know."

Bekbuta, sorely disappointed, watched the girl slowly walking away through the green field.

It was long past midday when Aikiz completed the round of the fields. Stern judge though she was, she was pleased with her scrupulous inspection. There was no fault she could find with the way the fields were kept.

When she got back to the camp she saw a dusty car parked in front of it.

"The district office car," she thought, surprised. "Jurabayev must be here. But why didn't I see him?"

There he was now, walking up to the camp from the opposite direction.

"Good afternoon, Comrade Jurabayev," Aikiz said when he came nearer.

"Hello, Aikiz."

"Have you been here long?"

"Yes, for quite some time. About four hours."

"But why didn't I see you? And why didn't anybody tell me?"

"I told them not to," Jurabayev said with a laugh. "I wanted to look the fields over without the chairman watching me, and to find you out in your sins personally."

"Have you found me out in many sins?" Aikiz asked without any anxiety. "I've been over the fields too. They're good, I think."

"I quite agree. They're good and the people are working well too. You could do with a bit more fertilizer here and there," Jurabayev said.

"Where do you want to go next? D'you mind if I come with you?"

"At the moment I'm not going anywhere," Jurabayev replied. "At the moment I'm planning to have a very earnest talk with a certain Communist called Aikiz. Let's go inside, there's no one there."

Aikiz followed him in and sat beside him on the bench.

"Our talk will be rather unusual today," Jurabayev began. "Tell me, have you known Alimjan long?"

"Alimjan? Why, since we were children." Aikiz was mystified.

"What sort of man is he in your opinion?"

"Has anything happened to him?" Aikiz's voice sank to a whisper.

There was a moment of silence.

"He's a good man. He's a true Communist," Aikiz spoke passionately now. "You know yourself how selflessly he worked on the Kok-Bulak. His team is the best in our kolkhoz. Our Party organization took on new life ever since Alimjan was appointed the secretary. He's a man of honour."

"In other words, you think Alimjan completely trustworthy. Do you trust him completely?"

"I do. He's one of the most decent and honest men." Tears welled up in her eyes. "Comrade Jurabayev, you aren't doubting him, are you?"

"Not I, I'm not. But why are you, Aikiz? You said it so well that Alimjan was a straight, honourable man, a true Communist, devoted to the Party, who has proved his worth both in the war and in the fields. He's going to study and make a good future for himself. A man like

Alimjan will never fail or betray anyone. And he loves you so, Aikiz."

Aikiz nodded and raised her tearful eyes to Jurabayev.

"Do you love him truly, Aikiz?"

"Yes."

"Can it be that Umurzak-ata is against it?"

"I never told him anything," Aikiz whispered.

"But then why haven't I received an invitation to your wedding feast yet?" he cried merrily.

Their voices dropped. They talked with the intimacy of old friends.

"Comrade Jurabayev, I want to tell you that we've loved one another for a long time, ever since the war. Alimjan wrote to me from the fighting lines, and I wrote back. After the war, he asked me to marry him. Father would have agreed. But I hesitated. Alimjan had seen the world, he had gone through a lot. I was sure he would not stay here long, that he'd go to town. And I could not have parted with our kolkhoz. And besides, I thought I wasn't a match for him, I was ignorant compared to him. That's what made me hesitate. But not for long. I just tried to make sure of both of us."

"It took you a whole year, did it?"

"Is that much? When we were clearing the springs, I quite made up my mind, I told him.... And then there was that mistake of mine. You know all about it, Comrade Jurabayev, you had it reported to you in detail. I almost wrecked the work of hundreds of people, my own people...."

"Surely Alimjan..."

"Oh no, no. He didn't say a word to me, he did not scold or abuse me. But that's the whole point, Comrade Jurabayev. At first I thought he couldn't love me very much, because silence means indifference. But then it occurred to me that he pitied me. There was pity in his love, but no respect. He had no faith in me any longer. That's why he said nothing. I was afraid that he was just making an effort to pretend there was nothing wrong between us. And I couldn't accept that. If he no longer trusted me I could not become his wife."

"You have misjudged Alimjan, Aikiz."

Aikiz said nothing, she clenched her hands so tight that the fingers turned white.

"You have underestimated him," Jurabayev went on. "He's much bigger than you thought him to be. In this case ... or shall I say in this misunderstanding ... he proved bigger than you. Your false pride took the upper hand, and Alimjan has no feelings that are false."

They both fell silent.

"What's the date today?" Jurabayev asked in a business-like tone.

Aikiz told him, startled with his question.

"You see how many days went by since the water of the Kok-Bulak came to Altyn-Sai?"

"Did he tell you that too?" Aikiz asked in a small voice.

"Is Alimjan the sort of man to talk about something as intimate as this? No, he did not tell me, I gave him the third degree yesterday and got it out of him. But that's beside the point. It's up to you to keep your word, Aikiz, since there are no good reasons not to, and the

date set by you is long past. And promises have to be kept, you know."

"I'll keep my word," Aikiz answered smiling.

Jurabayev swung to his feet and said with affected gruffness:

"I thought I'd come to Altyn-Sai later this evening. I'll look in at the dam first and then I'll drop in to see you. It won't surprise anyone if the secretary of the District Party Committee comes calling on his old friend, Umurzak-ata. I hope that by then you will have given your answer to Alimjan. I've never played the role of match-maker yet, Aikiz, but I'll have a try at it."

They parted. Watching the car roll away Aikiz thought:

"How nice he was to me, how friendly."

XXII

A thin, flimsy ribbon of smoke curled up on the hill beside the staff headquarters' tent. There was a crude semblance of a hearth built of a few slabs of turf behind it. Oil sizzled and hissed in a pot placed over the fire.

Bekbuta, in a brown shirt tucked into his faded military breeches, his robe discarded, was the high priest officiating at this rite. He either stirred the pot with a wooden spoon which had a long, slim handle, or fed the fire in the hearth.

Suvankul was sitting on the grass slicing carrots with a narrow sharp knife.

It requires skill to slice carrots for a pilau according to all the rules of oriental culinary art. It takes concen-

tration. No wonder then that Suvankul was so engrossed he paid no attention to Bekbuta's chatter.

When all the carrots had been sliced and put into a large, colourfully designed earthenware dish, Suvankul started on the green onions, slicing the crunching bunch and darting sidelong glances at Bekbuta in anticipation of his gasps of admiration and his questions.

But Bekbuta offered no comment. He seemed to be quite indifferent to the amazing fact that Suvankul had provided for the pilau a big bunch of bright green onions, straight out of the bed, rather than some last year's tough heads. Suvankul gave Bekbuta a hurt look and made up his mind to ignore him completely.

From the valley down below came the voices of people, the clatter of cart wheels, roars of tractors, clang of conveyers, neighing of horses, cries of donkeys and bleats of camels. The dam was completed. Thousands of people had arrived for the opening ceremony from all the kolkhozes of the submontane region to watch the waters of the Altyn-Sai enter the canal built by the Komsomols.

The two hard-working cooks lent a deaf ear to all this noise. In the east, the cooking of pilau is considered a man's job, and a highly responsible one too.

Bekbuta was the first to break the long silence.

"Why so quiet?" he asked. "Never a sound from you in a whole hour. You haven't sliced your tongue together with the carrots, have you? Or, perhaps, I've thrown all your jokes into the fire by mistake? No wonder the fire seemed to be blazing so peculiarly! I see now it's Suvankul's wooden jokes I've thrown in. Look at the flames! The pilau is sizzling like mad."

Suvankul never looked up from his work.

"I don't think they were mine, they're your jokes in the fire," he said quite seriously. "You did right too. Your tongue wags too fast. You never stop to think whether it's a youngster or a sedate old man you're making fun of. I must say that your jokes are quite out of place sometimes. The best thing you could do was burn them."

"Ah, friend, friend!" Bekbuta took up. "You're as clumsy as a camel. A good, cutting joke is the only thing that ever wakes you up at all. You're as slow to rouse as a caravan of camels."

"It's a sad thing if I'm like a caravan of camels. But then there's no doubt at all that you are the very spit of a chattering magpie. And that's twice as sad."

Bekbuta reciprocated with a hearty laugh, and for a while there was silence again.

While Bekbuta stirred the pot, Suvankul sliced the onions, unhurriedly and carefully.

"You shouldn't have lost your temper with me," Bekbuta spoke again. "I've got a present for you, my bosom pal, and there you go snarling at me. You'll have to plead with me quite hard now to appease me and make me show it to you."

"I've no mind to plead with you at all. I know perfectly well that you'll blab it all out. You can't keep a secret."

Finished with the onions, Suvankul put on a mask of complete indifference, and strode up to his friend.

"All right, show me the present." He touched Bekbuta on the shoulder.

Bekbuta smiled. Looking mysterious and solemn, he silently made for his robe lying a little away from the hearth. Suvankul followed.

His movements pointedly unhurried, Bekbuta unrolled his robe. He took out a bundle and very, very slowly began to untie the ends.

"You do potter so!" Suvankul's patience snapped.

"Hold on, old pal. In the army they used to say that haste was only good in catching fleas."

The knots were untied at last and the contents of the bundle startlingly revealed. Suvankul gasped at the sight of five bright red tomatoes and as many cucumbers.

"And you were going to crush me with your miserable bunch of onions, strutting about like a turkey cock!" Bekbuta teased. "You try and get some tomatoes and cucumbers so early in the season, then I'll admit that you're an efficient commissary."

"I've never been in the army so it couldn't apply to me. It's different with you. It shows that you've been on the job all through the war," Suvankul made the thrust with an innocent look.

Bekbuta actually flushed with indignation.

"It never occurred to me before that my friend's head was made of solid wood. Remember this once and for all: firstly, there are no commissaries on the front line, and secondly, I was a submachine-gunner all through the war and not a commissary. Is that clear? However, it's hardly worth while explaining all this to a person as hopelessly civilian as you, my honoured friend."

"It isn't really. I understood you very well," Suvankul

said, highly pleased that he had maddened Bekbuta to raving point.

"If that is so, my highly intelligent friend, I shall beg you to go back to your work and slice these wonderful products created by nature and one much respected farmer. Tomatoes and cucumbers will go splendidly with the pilau. And hurry up about it. The pilau is ready and our guests won't be long in coming. There they are now! Get a move on with the slicing."

Aikiz and Alimjan were coming up the hill. Bekbuta turned away to the pot and sang:

There are many maidens fair in our land,
Stars are dimmed before the splendour of their eyes,
Pallid moon with envy sickens in the skies,
But the fairest of the fair is coming now.

In her blue kerchief of silk she looks her best,
To her beauty add intelligence and zest,
And you'll never find her equal anywhere,
Search through countries north, south, east or west.

"Assalam aleikum!" Aikiz greeted the two men. The words of Bekbuta's song made her self-conscious.

She walked into the tent and wearily sank down on the rug which had been thoughtfully spread on the ground by her hosts. She put the bunch of violets she was carrying in her lap, and wiped her hot face with a handkerchief.

"Come and sit down, Alimjan-aka," she called.

Alimjan sat down beside her and glanced at his watch.

"Jurabayev and Sultanov will be here in an hour."

"That's fine. Everyone's been gathered for hours. They've rigged up a platform on a five-ton lorry, and decked it out as best they could."

With great pomp and solemnity Bekbuta brought in a dish of tomatoes, cucumbers and onions, sliced with true artistry and generously dashed with red pepper, and placed it before his guests.

"Oh, Bekbuta! Where did all this come from?" Aikiz exclaimed.

"It's our own kolkhoz produce," Bekbuta replied proudly. "Have some, do. I'll bring the pilau in directly."

"But where did these tomatoes and cucumbers come from?" Aikiz insisted. "They're out of season."

"Our farmers' hands of gold have forced them to ripen two months ahead of time," Bekbuta said.

Suvankul looked downcast. His green onions were quite overshadowed by the tomatoes and cucumbers.

"I know, from Halim-bobo's hothouse," Alimjan said.

"You've guessed it," Bekbuta said. "On my way here this morning I dropped in on the old man. There are marvellous things growing in his hothouse. Naturally I told him that the dam would be completed today. The old man was speechless with joy, and then he said: 'At last I'll have enough water to make a really big thing of my hothouses.' And when I told him we were going to cook some pilau, he lavished these tomatoes and cucumbers on me, and later on he sent some green onions with Suvankul. Oh yes, I almost forgot to tell you. When I was leaving Halim-bobo complained to me about you and said that Aikiz and Alimjan were so busy with their

own affairs they had forgotten all about him. He wants you to come and see him. He's gathered in his first crop, he says he'll give you a real treat."

"He's a stubborn old man, he's got his hothouse after all," Aikiz said.

"We'll have no end of trouble now," Alimjan said with a laugh. "Halim-bobo has always dreamed of planting a great big garden for the kolkhoz, and now that there's water he'll never stop pestering Kadyrov. You'll see, Aikiz, you'll have to agree to this garden."

"I shan't object. Let's have a garden, and no smaller than a fifteen-acre one. Halim-bobo has let me in on his dream long ago. He wants to grow some citrus plants."

Bekbuta laughed at this.

"He's jealous of Razimat Mussa Mukhamedov, that's why, because the man had met Michurin once and had spoken to him."

"Bekbuta, if the pilau gets overdone will your eloquence alone feed your guests?" Suvankul, silent all this while, asked politely. "Do you think our guests would rather have your underdone speech than pilau?"

Bekbuta rushed to the pot, while Aikiz burst into merry peals of laughter.

"When I hear my darling laughing . . ." Alimjan whispered in her ear.

"Quiet, darling, they'll hear," Aikiz whispered back and, seeing that Bekbuta and Suvankul were busily fussing about the pot, rubbed her cheek against Alimjan's shoulder.

"The pilau is really good!" Bekbuta announced, lifting the lid of the pot. "Friends, this is an extra special pilau.

It's made of rice, planted when the *jida* was in bloom. Every grain is the size of a cotton seed. It's so good that I have to warn you—mind you don't eat your tongues with it."

A great smoking dish of pilau was now placed before the guests. They did not have to be urged to eat for they were ravenous and the pilau was delicious.

When they had cleared the dish, Suvankul brought them bowls of fragrant green tea. But before they could taste it they were startled by the hooting of motor car horns down below.

"Could we have been here for a whole hour? It's time to go," Aikiz said, looking at Alimjan.

With a habitual gesture Alimjan straightened his tunic, buttoned his collar and got up from the rug.

"Let us go, comrades."

XXIII

The body of the dam lay across he Altyn-Sai gully, holding in check the subdued and pacified waters beyond. The narrow gully ran away in a gleaming ribbon of water which was rising slowly, hiding the rocks lining the walls from view.

If one stood on the dam and faced the gully one would not be overimpressed by the volume of water, which only appeared to have risen by two or three metres. But if one looked the other way, down towards the lowlands, into the parched and sinister depths of the gully, one would be struck with the immensity of the force with which the subdued water was bearing down on the stone barrier.

The canal, starting from the grey concrete lock, ran along the foot of the mountains. There was no water in it yet. The lock gate was secured with a wide bright red ribbon, tied into a huge bow. There were masses of flowers.

Jurabayev, Sultanov, Smirnov, Aikiz and Alimjan stood up on the platform of a lorry placed in the middle of a meadow close to the dam. The lorry was decorated with red cloth banners and great bunches of tulips, violets, and branches of planes and elms.

The meadow was thronged with people—sunburnt, shiny faces, brightly coloured clothes, silver and black skull-caps, gay kerchiefs. The crowd swayed like a billowing sea or a steppe of tall grass stirring in the breeze.

Men and women came from all the Altyn-Sai kolkhozes to celebrate the completion of the irrigation works and the commencement of cotton planting.

Drums rolled, trumpets blared triumphantly, the young people broke into a dance—the girls moving gracefully and smoothly, and the men doing fast and intricate steps.

Jurabayev raised his hand. The noise began to die down, and soon perfect silence reigned over the meadow. The drums and trumpets were stilled, and the dancers, their faces flushed, came to a stop.

Everyone crowded closer to the lorry to hear Jurabayev speak.

"Comrades! On behalf of the District Party Committee, the Executive Committee and our district as a whole, allow me to congratulate and thank you for the undertaking you had so courageously started, carried out and completed so gloriously. Your daring and initiative have dem-

onstrated to all the other kolkhozes situated in our submontane regions that this fight for water is the only way to achieve happiness and prosperity. Your example will be followed by other kolkhozes, and all those farmers eking out an existence on the waterless tracts of land high up in the mountains, will come down to settle in the newly-irrigated fields. With drought and dry winds threatening our crops every year, the only way to security is to develop irrigated fields. You have the heartfelt gratitude of all those mountain dwellers presently resettling in the submontane regions. We shall say to them: 'Welcome!'

"Allow me, comrades, on behalf of the District Party Committee and all of you present to thank the initiator of this great undertaking—Aikiz Umurzakova, and the director of the project—Comrade Smirnov."

Jurabayev took a step back and shook first Aikiz's hand and then Smirnov's.

Skull-caps were flung up high in the air, streaking like a flock of silver birds, and voices cried:

"Let Aikiz speak!"

"Let Ivan Nikitich speak!"

"We want to hear Aikiz and Smirnov!"

"There's nothing for it, comrades, you'll have to speak. The people want to hear you." Jurabayev took Aikiz by the shoulders, pushed her in front and said: "Come on, Aikiz. Begin."

"Speak, Aikiz, speak!" the crowd shouted.

Aikiz looked down into the sea of faces and felt no shyness at all. It was as if she had trudged a very long and difficult mountain road, neither resting nor sleeping, just

striving to get to the end of it with never a thought of the reward that was awaiting her there. And now the goal was reached. There was her reward—those happy faces turned to her and those friendly hands stretched to her. Did she deserve this trust? Was she truly worthy of it?

She spoke in a voice breaking with emotion.

"My friends! You believed so strongly in what you were doing that the result could be nothing but victorious. Our kolkhozes have their own irrigated fields for the first time in history. We shall no longer look at the sky apprehensively wondering if it will give us rain or not. We are no longer dependent on nature's mercies. The dry wind is no longer a menace to us. Forward, friends, forward along the road shown us by our beloved Party! Forward, with the help of our brothers—the great Russian people! We shall defeat the blind forces of nature and make them serve us."

The end of her speech was drowned in cheers and applause. The crowd now shouted for Smirnov to speak.

Smirnov stepped forward and took off his glasses. He opened his mouth to take a deep breath, and the mole on his chin jumped. True to habit, he spoke as if carrying on an argument.

"It's quite out of the question, dear friends, to stop at what we have achieved. True, we've completed the hardest part of the job, the part that held most hazards for us. We were unsafe from misjudgement and mistakes, the springs may have proved less copious than we had estimated. But your efforts have brought results surpassing

all expectation. This dam will mark the era of a new life, and moreover it will enable us to build a power station on it and electrify all the agricultural machinery. This will mean another great stride towards communism. And we shall build the power station, the pledge will be ourselves, tempered in work in the true communist spirit. Take such men as my friend Alimjan and his team for instance. It was they who found the Kok-Bulak, choked by the basmach bands forty years ago. They broke through the walls of rock and reclaimed the spring. People like Alimjan, Aikiz, Bekbuta, Suvankul, and all of us to a man, are strong enough to win another victory! Glory to our coming victories! Long live our glorious Communist Party!"

Hundreds of mattocks flashed with polished steel as strong arms swung them high overhead. The people saluted with their weapons of peace, asseverating their devotion to the cause of communism.

Jurabayev and the others now proceeded to the lock.

Although the gathering was many thousand strong, the silence that had fallen was so complete a car could be heard purring down the distant Altyn-Sai highway.

Jurabayev went up to the lock gate. Aikiz handed him a pair of scissors. He cut the ribbon. Now he gave the wheel a few turns.

Slowly the gate moved open, and water rushed gurgling and rippling into the new canal.

The rushing stream seemed to do away with the silence. The crowd roared and cheered, drums rolled, trumpets clamoured and skull-caps flew high, flickering in the air.

Water came into the fields of Altyn-Sai.

XXIV

The end of June was frightfully hot with a scorching, parching heat. Even the old people suffered from it, saying that never in all their long lives did they remember a summer as hot as this.

In the submontane regions the early morning coolness usually lingered for two or three hours after sunrise, gradually merging with the heat of the day. But this was in ordinary summers.

This particular summer, though, heat began as soon as the sun rose. With the first light of dawn the burning sands of the Kyzyl-Kum began to exhale their mighty, scorching breath. The light was blinding. The fiery tongue of the dry wind licked every tree trunk, every blade of grass, and the lush leafage of Altyn-Sai's orchards wilted and shrivelled in the fire of its touch.

In ordinary summers the dry wind would blow for a day or two and then slacken to give the wearied earth a short respite. But this year it blew without a break and its fury did not abate.

In the old days it would have spelled utter ruin for the farmers of Altyn-Sai. But now the dry wind was powerless; man had brought water into the kolkhoz fields.

The parching breath of the dry wind wilted the broad leaves of the cotton plants but it lacked strength to kill the sturdy stalks. The roots thirstily sucked up the life-giving juices from the watered soil, the vigorous stalks sent these juices up the stems to the leaves, reviving them and giving them strength and courage to resist the desert wind.

Although there was plenty of water in Altyn-Sai now. old Halim-bobo could not quell his anxiety for his garden, for the dry wind had been blowing steadily for two whole weeks.

When water was at a premium, Halim-bobo had no chance to enlarge his four-acre garden and show what he could really do. But he had felt no anxiety for his fruit trees then, secure behind a tall wall of poplars and spreading elms, planted around his small garden several rows deep.

But this year, this old pupil of Michurin's had extended his garden far along the new canal, and where the groves of elms and poplars ended, there was no protection from the dry wind. It could easily scorch the tender young saplings which had just been planted.

Halim-bobo had not slept a wink since the moment he had sensed the approaching dry wind in the air. With the first streak of light in the eastern sky, the old man got up from his hard bed rigged up in the garden, and peered hard into the sky, to see if there were any signs of the wind getting out of breath. But he found nothing to point to a change of weather. Pulling on his clothes he would grumble resentfully: "Allah's lost his mind completely."

After that Halim-bobo would go and look at his young trees. Although he was over seventy he had lost none of his perseverance or energy. He would examine every single tree for viability.

All that summer through Halim-hobo never left his garden day or night. He had made his quarters close to the glimmering and rippling irrigation ditch where the garden ended and the cotton fields began.

A great wooden bed was built for him by Tursunkul, the kolkhoz's best carpenter. It could hardly be called a bed in the usual sense of the word though, for it was as wide as it was long, and was supported on tall intricately and beautifully carved legs of elm. A rug of old workmanship, with the brightness of its original colours undimmed, covered this bed, placed under a canopy of grape vines. This roofing was so thick even the noonday rays of the sun failed to pierce it. Halim-bobo would retire into the coolness of his den during the heat of the day, and this was also where he received his friends who came to visit him.

The garden was hemmed in on three sides by cotton fields. Sitting on his bed Halim-bobo could admire the lush green plot grown by his old friend Umurzak-ata and his team. The dark-green, leafy shrubs would come up to the waist of the tallest of men, he saw.

Old Halim-bobo was fond of strolling through the rows of cotton in the nearest field, and every time he would come back with a feeling of satisfaction and joy. Strict judge though he was he found the plants excellently cared for according to the most advanced methods.

On this particular evening, Halim-bobo's joy was truly boundless, and it was Umurzak-ata who brought him the glad tidings.

Umurzak-ata dropped in to see Halim-bobo when day was coming to an end and the worn out sun hung like a great red bowl made of pure bronze by a skilled craftsman of Bokhara.

The visitor wore a new silk robe, given to him by Alimjan on the day of his wedding, a month ago. Umurzak-ata looked younger and happier nowadays.

A couple of days ago he had gone to town with the newlyweds. While the young people were buying things for their house at the department store, Umurzak-ata went to have a look at the toys. The unsuspecting salesman was staggered by the storm of abuse the old man subjected him to, criticizing all the goods the toy department had to offer.

"You ought to be ashamed, young man, to sell such ugly toys," he roared. "D'you call this a horse?" Umurzak-ata picked up a large crudely made toy. "Does this look like those fleet-footed horses of ours we used to pursue the basmach bands on? And is this the sort of horse we have in our kolkhozes today? We never had a miserable jade like this in our country. Our horses are proper *tulpars*!* It's no toy horse you're offering our children but some mixture of donkey and camel. And why don't you keep any tricycles in stock? Why haven't you any of those boxes with all those fancy blocks and things a child could build a Kremlin tower with, or a bridge or any other useful structure?"

The baffled salesman tried his best to calm the irate old man assuring him that a new lot of goods was shortly due, and inviting the highly esteemed client to come back in a day or two, if it was not too much trouble, when all his demands would be fully satisfied.

Aikiz and Alimjan came in just then and saved the poor salesman from further abuse. They led Umurzak-ata away. Aikiz almost cried with embarrassment, but Alimjan merely laughed and sided with his father-in-law, who went on grumbling at salesmen in general all the way home.

* *Tulpar*—a legendary horse.—*Tr.*

When Umurzak-ata and Halim-bobo had exchanged greetings with all the old-world ceremony, they sat down on the bed and chatted.

"What's new in the village?" Halim-bobo asked.

"There's plenty of news," Umurzak-ata took his time answering. "Comrades Jurabayev and Smirnov arrived early this afternoon. They looked over the locality of the future power station. They're at the kolkhoz office now. Comrade Jurabayev asked me to tell you that he'll be sure to drop in to see you this evening. . . ."

The two friends, both of them old and wise with experience, enjoyed their pleasant, leisurely chat. Both had begun life in those black days of feudalism which the young could only judge by hearsay now. And the end of the road was leading them both to communism.

When the sun had sunk low, two cars rolled up to the garden. Jurabayev, Smirnov, Aikiz, Alimjan and Kadyrov got out.

Halim-bobo was highly flattered by this honour. He showed his guests round the garden. They looked at the young vineyard, the rows of apricot, cherry, apple and pomegranate trees which hardly reached to one's shoulder. But soon they would grow tall and strong, watered with the mountain springs and warmed in the sun, and the orchard would spread far and wide, obliterating all traces of the old waste plot. A year would go by and the vines and cherries would yield their first crop. Thousands of new saplings would cover the distance from the fields to the mountains. And in five or six years' time, hundreds of tons of fruit would flow from here in a steady

stream to all ends of the vast country to give people health and vigour, to heal the sick and the weary.

The visitors looked at the new plantings and went over the whole territory of the orchard, coming to pause on its western extreme.

The sun had blazed its last. Night was falling with a promise of coolness. But from the west, the tireless Kyzyl-Kum never slackened its onslaughts of hot air.

"That's where our boundary line is, over there," Halim-bobo pointed to a strip of young shelter plantings. "We've covered several acres with a belt of oaks, poplars and elms. The belt stretches along all our kolkhoz lands and in two or three years it'll be a good protection against dry winds. The Kyzyl-Kum is over there." He pointed and fell silent.

Kadyrov now spoke.

"I'm expected to confess to my sins, but I don't consider myself guilty of all that I'm accused of. I've made my mistakes of course, but who hasn't? We all make mistakes occasionally. But in this particular case I've got to admit my guilt. It was difficult finding enough oak and elm sets this spring, and I was too busy, I had more than enough on my hands as it was. I advised Halim-bobo to plant cuttings or give the idea up altogether. But he asked if I'd let him look for the sets himself. I did, of course, and he found them with your help, Comrade Jurabayev."

"It's good to confess when one realizes one's own guilt," Umurzak-ata spoke thoughtfully. "A sincere confession is good, but a lengthy one only confuses the issue. Dear Comrade Kadyrov, of all your mistakes you only admit those that life itself exposes. But one should see

one's mistakes a long way off, there's a saying that answers it: 'When riding a camel look ahead.' And you, my dear friend, prefer to glance back at the camel's tail. Our people refuse to stand still, and you'd do well to try and catch up with them."

Kadyrov said nothing in reply.

The party moved back to Halim-bobo's den when it was quite dark. A great pot of sizzling pilau cooking over a crackling fire was awaiting them. Halim-bobo would not take no for an answer and insisted that his guests stay for supper.

"Don't hurt an old man," he said to Jurabayev and Smirnov. "You've never been my guests before. I am old, I have to value and cling to every moment of joy. Please stay for supper. Pilau in the open, and in an orchard too, is something Allah himself would not refuse if he were invited."

They did not want to hurt his feelings and stayed.

The men dusted their boots, washed their hands and faces, opened the necks of their shirts and sat down on the rug.

Aikiz helped Halim-bobo with the serving.

The paraffin lamp shed a very frugal light, and soon it was swallowed up completely in the bluish beams of the moon rising behind the Kok-Tau.

While waiting for the pilau, the guests began to talk of the future power station which was foremost in all their minds. Smirnov had come back from Tashkent only the day before. The Government had endorsed the Altyn-Sai power station construction.

"The Government considers it a very important under-

taking," Jurabayev said. "We shall soon receive a large number of excavators, cranes and other machinery."

"You are doing a great thing for our people, son," Umurzak-ata spoke, addressing Smirnov. "Our children and grandchildren will gratefully and fondly repeat the name of the Russian engineer who first helped us irrigate our arid lands and then undertook a thing as blessed as this! Think of it, he wants machinery to shoulder the farmer's toilsome work! Am I right, dear Comrade Jurabayev?"

"You are, Umurzak-ata. The help which our elder brothers, the great Russian people, are giving us is inestimable. We stand on the threshold of great changes, great events. This undertaking will make a radical change in the life of the submontane regions. Just think of it, it will enable us to plant any crops that need watering and will for ever and ever deliver our fields from aridity. But that is not all, far from all. Before many years are gone our irrigated fields will come close to the Kyzyl-Kum. Step by step, dauntlessly and persistently, they will encroach upon the desert. Death to the desert! The barren, burning sands which make the soil sterile will disappear. Orchards will bloom in the desert. This infernal kitchen, this fire-breathing furnace of dry winds will be exterminated, obliterated from the face of the earth. It is indeed the time of great changes. We have dug a canal. We have locked the waters of the Altyn-Sai behind a dam. And this is a stride ahead. Our lands border on the Kyzyl-Kum. Today it's nothing but barren desert. But, given water, even the sands will become fertile fields. Following your example, our kolkhozes armed with Soviet science of which there is

no equal in the world will launch an attack on the desert. And the sands will retreat from us. We shall conquer the desert. Our Party will lead us in battle against the elements, our glorious elder brothers, the great Russian people, will help us faithfully. We shall win. The irrigation of the Altyn-Sai tracts is the first stride in our advance upon the desert."

The guests left. It was late. Aikiz and Alimjan refused a lift, saying they would rather walk home.

A clear moon floated majestically over the world and its serene light turned the distant mountain tops to silver. The air was pure and fresh. Not a sound, not a rustle. Even the cicadas were silent. A cricket chirped up now and again, a field inhabitant gave a tiny squeak, and then silence resumed once more.

Only the streams, the sleepless streams, rang on and on without disturbing the stillness of the night, as they carried their waters into the fields, bringing them happiness and bliss.

Aikiz and Alimjan walked arm in arm.

They came out on the highroad and turned towards the village. There was Altyn-Sai before them, flooded with electricity against which the pale beams of the moon were impotent. The lights radiated in straight, slender lines towards the centre of the village where they became intricately interwoven.

"Look at all those lights!" Aikiz said. "How bright they are! It's the light of communism shining on us from tomorrow. Oh, Alimjan-aka, all this happiness is ours!"

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TO THE READER

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